

“Well, That’s What She Gets...”: Black Teenage Girls’ Sexual and Reproductive Choice in Young Adult Literature

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Black girls and women are not supposed to express or act upon their sexuality, because if they do, they are called sluts who deserve whatever they get. This is especially true if they are young, become pregnant, and the pregnancy is unplanned. Society sees the sexuality of Black girls and women through pervasive, heavily reproduced stereotypes, which often place Black girls and women at opposite extremes (Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* 76): the asexual mammy and the hypersexual jezebel. These two opposites continue to be used to justify the treatment of Black girls in society. In fact, the jezebel has been used to justify the sexual aggression directed at Black girls in the terms of sexual assault while simultaneously being used as reasoning for Black girl teenage pregnancy.

Black girls becoming pregnant is not a new phenomenon, yet the reveal of the pregnancy is met with accusations of promiscuity and sexuality shaming, largely led by parents, guardians, and boyfriends or sexual partners. These people place the Black girl in a position where she must own up to their sexual crimes against the patriarchal society which deems them deviant, marking them "one of those girls." This study analyzes the discourse that surrounds the construction of Black teenage pregnancy as discussed in the young adult novels *My Life as a Rhombus* (2008) by Varian Johnson, and Elizabeth Acevedo's *With the Fire on High* (2019). It discusses the specific ways that characters Rhonda, Sarah, and Emoni navigate the choices around their pregnancies, the dissonance between social expectations of Black girl sexuality, and the social stigma that comes from being a sexually active Black girl and teenage mother.

In line with exploring discourse around Black girl sexuality, teenage pregnancy, and teenage motherhood, the methodology and research questions align with critical discourse analysis (CDA) perspectives. CDA is a critical perspective "that may be found in all areas of discourse studies [...] such narrative analysis" (van Dijk 466). CDA looks at the power

Menefee: “Well, That’s What She Gets...”

surrounding discourses on personal, local, and societal issues. The study operationalizes discourse as “a socially accepted association among ways of using language, of thinking, and of acting that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or ‘social network’” (Gee 1). CDA looks at discourses in conversation with each other as they feed into the construction of society and what gets perpetrated because of them. There are two understandings of discourse, and this study utilizes both little ‘d’ discourse and big ‘D’ discourse. Little ‘d’ discourse refers to the micro or personal level of discourse. The big ‘D’ discourse refers to the macro level of discourse which “is produced through behaviors, decisions, and other discursive practices that form a continuum of socio-cultural practices adversely influencing a specific populace’s social, economic, political, and educational outcomes” (McMillian 3). The micro discourse in one’s everyday life happens within the macro discourse that constitutes the norms and attitudes of those who hold power.

In short, CDA explores the distribution of power through talk. It analyzes the reproduction of dominance or “the exercise of social power by elites, institutions, or groups, that results in social inequality, including political, cultural, class, ethnic, racial, and gender inequality” (van Dijk 250). These reproductions include sexism and other patriarchal structures. The reproductions led to the research questions that guided this study’s data collection and analysis. The questions have been broken down into micro and macro to show the level of discourse analyzed within the narrative of the stories.

Micro

1. What discourse do the protagonists engage in to establish sexual autonomy?
2. How are the protagonists utilizing their discourse as resistance against the dominant Discourse?

Macro

1. What Discourse do secondary characters use as responses to the protagonists' pregnancies?
2. How does the pervasiveness of the Discourse used by society inform the sexual and reproductive choices protagonists make?

Related Literature

Social Politics of Black Girl Sexuality, Pregnancy, and Motherhood

There is a breadth of research on Black girl sexuality regarding the socio-historical and political factors that impact Black girls' developing sexual identities. Black girls' and women's bodies have historically never been theirs; instead, they were the property of their enslavers who determined their positions, whether in the forced service of work or forced sexual acts, breeding, and birthing (Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* 79). History has placed unfair sexual and social obligations on Black girls to act in line with their socio-historically placement, which continues to endanger them with the threat of sexual violence. Black girls are never allowed to be girls and are often subject to adultification bias which perceptively ages them, stripping them of nurture, protection, and support, and replacing those with claims that they are more independent and knowledgeable about adult topics. Black teenage pregnancy and motherhood has always been seen as a social problem impacting impoverished adolescent girls because it leads to low academic achievement and a lack of opportunities for social mobility (Ladner 427; Furstenberg et al. 315; Ladner 55). Scholars note how Black girls tend to forgo abortions or adoption even with the potential of low father involvement and low marriage rates (Furstenberg et al. 313). In

Menefee: “Well, That’s What She Gets...”

short, Black teenage girls face overwhelming decisions in enacting agency over their own bodies.

Black Girl Sexuality and Pregnancy in Young Adult Literature

The studies discussed in this section, are examples of different aspects of Black girl sexuality within the genre of young adult literature, rather than an encompassing overview. Studies on sexual identity development within young adult literature includes examples of a lesbian character navigating their sexual orientation (Roundtree 59), characters having conversations about sex (Roundtree 73; Coffel, “Strong Portraits” 17), characters determining whether to engage in romantic relationships (Brooks et al. 27-28), characters engaging in their sexual agency freely (Brook et al. 28; Coffel, “Strong Portraits” 18), and characters who are being sexually exploited by boys and men (Roundtree 23). Each of the characters discussed in these studies represents aspects of sexual identity development that are often extensively discussed, including: characters having conversations around sex and characters deciding to be sexually active, or sexual identity developments that are routinely ignored within young adult narratives; namely, the sexual identity development of lesbian and queer characters.

Generally, the novels analyzed in the literature had characters facing teenage pregnancy (Smith 396), the ultimate consequence of sexual activity, including sexual assault (Coffel, “Strong Portraits” 16). Coffel discusses Kelly and Luttrell’s four discourses to explain the reasoning for teenage pregnancy: the wrong-girl frame, which suggests that there is something wrong with the girl; the wrong-society frame that speaks to girls’ lack of birth control methods; the wrong-family frame that positions the family is to blame, that the girl’s upbringing is wrong; and lastly, the failure into success where due to the girls’ pregnancy they often have the opportunity to turn their lives around or participate within the school or other social institutions

differently than before (46). Although there is a small amount of truth to be seen in each of the discourses, as Coffel notes, these things should not discount the girl from being able to be consensually active in sexual activity or stigmatized for it (46-47). Smith explains how, generally, novels in some way encourage some emulation (397). Even so, Nichols argues that although authors of the novels illustrate the differences young adults who are pregnant and teen parents face (i.e., social stigma, changes in social life, and sleeping patterns), the more substantial life changes are less apparent (37). The novels present an idealized or romanticized view of teen pregnancy and parenting that is hopeful. In short, while these novels can present dominant discourses and ideals, they are still illustrations of teen sexual activity and the consequences of that activity.

Teenage parenting is often portrayed within young adult literature as wasted potential, without any benefits or an opportunity for girls to gain self-agency through mothering (Smith 386-391). The novels analyzed were overwhelmingly pro-life, with only 10% of the protagonists in the novels Nichols' analyzed choosing abortions, although abortion is chosen in 40% of teenage pregnancies in real life (Nichols 37). Most of the characters analyzed had some reluctance or hesitation in wanting to be a mother. Many of the protagonists and their family members thought that they were too young and unprepared to be parents. Emge argues how young adults are bombarded with sexual messages, making having sex a glamorized must-try experience within their teen years, which they are not ready for "except that [...] sexual intercourse is much more than a physical experience. The force of an attachment formed through sexual intimacy is considerably more intense than many teens are psychologically prepared to handle" (26-27). Many scholars note how these initial misgivings about teen parenthood led young mothers to mature into agentic mothers. Brooks et al. languages this as an aspect of these

Menefee: “Well, That’s What She Gets…”

girls’ “sexual identity maturation,” meaning motherhood presents a step within a girl’s sexual identity fulfilled through finding that maternal voice (28). While Nichols and Smith note how while it is natural for a parent to love and appreciate their child, even parents face substantial changes to their lives more than that altered social and sleep schedules (Nicholas 35; Smith 386).

In the studies I analyzed for this review of literature, there was little focus on the distinct experiences of Black girls parsing through sexual identity development, teenage sexual activity, teenage pregnancy, and teenage motherhood. The previous studies that discussed novels with Black girl protagonists approached the character’s intersecting race and gender superficially (Coffel, “Stories of Teen Mothers: Fiction and Nonfiction”; Coffel, “Strong Portraits and Stereotypes: Pregnant and Mothering Teens in YA Fiction”; Nichols, “Facts and Fictions: Teen Pregnancy in Young Adult Literature”). The authors mention Blackness of the character without acknowledging the distinct social challenges Black girls face as they navigate sexuality, teen pregnancy, and teen motherhood are presented in contrast with that of White young adult protagonists. Essentially, the studies fail to position navigating a sexual identity development, teenage sexual activity, teenage pregnancy, and teenage motherhood within the complexities that accompany a marginalizing intersectional identity.

The previous studies I analyzed in this review shows there is a clear gap in studies that focus on Black teenage girl sexual activity, Black teenage girl pregnancy, and Black teenage girl motherhood. While Coffel (“Strong Portraits” 15) discusses the lack of pregnancy-focused young adult literature with Black protagonists, there similarly is an issue with conducting studies using the Black girl pregnancy themed narratives that are published. In short, while some studies within this review speaks on teenage pregnancy, there is little explicit mention of Black teenage girls dealing with the aftermath of their choices with themselves, their families, and their

Menefee: “Well, That’s What She Gets...”

children. The discourse around Black teenage pregnancy depicted in young adult literature is not well explored. The social stigma Black girls face, the aftereffects of navigating a sexual identity during and after pregnancy, and the path of teenage motherhood, all coupled with the dominant narratives they must contend with, have not been studied much.

Theoretical Framework

My theoretical perspective within this research is Patricia Hill Collins’ Black Feminist Thought (BFT), combined with her views and work on Black sexual politics. BFT is the distinct oppression that comes from being both Black and a girl or woman (The Combahee River Collective; Crenshaw; Collins). This knowledge helps to position Black girls and women as othered not only by race but also by gender, which helps to illustrate their experiences in nuanced ways. It also positions Black girls and women concerning the US’ neo-liberal society, more notably the concept of patriarchy interwoven into American society’s fabric. Collins defines BFT as an epistemological framework and argues that it “involves searching for its expression in alternative institutional locations and among women who are not commonly perceived as intellectuals” (*Black Feminist Thought* 16). It is about valuing all Black women and girls’ experiences and knowledge about themselves, their communities, and, more importantly, their bodies and beings.

BFT stems from the lived experiences of Black women who collectively contribute to the parameters of defining what a Black woman existence involves. Collins, in her work, posits that the importance of BFT becomes substantiated through conversations between community members. The many tenets of this framework include self-definition, agency, resistance, political advocacy, ethics of personal accountability, ethics of caring and empathy, and the importance of

Menefee: “Well, That’s What She Gets…”

Black motherhood. Furthermore, the framework involves questioning and reconstructing the controlling images and stereotypes that have plagued Black girls and women. These controlling images of Black girls and women attribute to the justification of the denigrating and mistreating of Black girls and women, which forces them to act as a shadow of White femininity and womanhood. Additionally, these controlling images impact the development of Black girls’ and women’s sexual identity, sexual agency, sexual choices, pregnancy, and mothering of Black girls and women. These pervasive and controlling images are integral to analyzing the discourse surrounding experiences of sexual activity, teenage pregnancy, and teenage motherhood.

Data Collection and Book Summaries

To gain insight into each narrative and analyze the discourse happening within the novels around Black girl sexuality, Black teen pregnancy, and Black motherhood, the novels were selected based on the following criteria: (a) the presence of a Black girl young adult protagonist(s), (b) the novel must be written in first person/first person narrative style, (c) the book being classified in the contemporary realistic fiction genre and published after the year 2000, (d) the novel must be written by a member of the African diaspora, and (e) the novel has not been used in any other research studies. The selection yielded two young adult novels. The data is drawn from the novels: *With the Fire on High* by Elizabeth Acevedo and *My Life as a Rhombus* by Varian Johnson.

With the Fire on High centers a young mother, Emoni, living in Philadelphia, PA, who is entering her senior year at Schomburg Charter School. She now has a three-year-old daughter, Emma. Emoni is a talented aspiring chef and wants desperately to make her mark on the culinary world despite being a young mother. Emoni is determined to make it through high school with

Menefee: “Well, That’s What She Gets…”

no other detours. However, the new transfer student, Malachi, and a culinary arts immersion class with a study abroad trip to Spain, complicates her situation. With graduation on the horizon, her role as a mother expands as her abuela shifts responsibility to Emoni. Although Emoni is overwhelmed by motherhood, school, culinary pursuits, and a budding relationship, she is determined to meet the challenges directly and in her own way.

My Life as a Rhombus takes place in Georgia in the late 2000s and focuses on the friendship of Rhonda Lee and Sarah Gamble, two girls who find themselves pregnant at different times during high school. Rhonda’s single father forces her to have an abortion, and after meeting Sarah, Rhonda vows, although at first hesitantly, that she will help to make sure that Sarah can decide for herself whether or not she wants to continue her pregnancy. Instead of shunning or slut-shaming Sarah as others did, Rhonda steps in to help her through her pregnancy, and in turn, Sarah helps Rhonda own her sexual autonomy.

Data Analysis

For data analysis, this study utilizes Fairclough’s three-dimensional conception of discourse, which focuses on how text is constructed to produce and distribute power or ideological inclinations within larger social practices within the two levels of discourse (72-73). The novels were read twice and coded for depictions of sexual activity, pregnancy, and motherhood. The text was analyzed line by line resulting in the collection of illustrative quotes where certain words, phrases, or dialogue between characters were coded instead of pages or chapters (Brooks et al. 14). During my analysis I organized the codes into three themes which include discourse about sexuality, pregnancy, and motherhood. Next, within each of those three themes, I labeled the coded themed data as examples of micro-level discourse, which include

Menefee: “Well, That’s What She Gets…”

agency and resistance against the dominant narratives, and macro-level discourse which includes topics of slut-shaming attitudes or stereotypes. Lastly, the themes that occurred from this analysis phase from across the novels compose the findings section.

Themes Across Novels

While looking at the discursive patterns of the data, two major themes presented themselves: the presumption of promiscuity and the choice of teenage motherhood.

The Presumption of Promiscuity

In Mikki Kendall’s *Hood Feminism*, she discusses a Black communal label phrased as a fast-tailed girl, or girls who seem to have some knowledge about sex or could have possibly already engaged in sex (47). These girls within the community have a reputation of being sexually indiscriminate, such as a jezebel, someone that no Black girl should ever aspire to become. When these Black girls find themselves pregnant, their promiscuity or fast-tailed girlness is assumed. This notion is an ideological and social construct/power enacted on Black girls, making it align with macro level Discourse as is reflected in both novels with the characters Emoni and Sarah.

In this text excerpt, Rhonda tells her best friend, Gail, that Sarah is pregnant, which is why the two of them have been spending so much time together. “‘Gail, she’s pregnant.’ Gail’s mouth dropped open as she stared at me for a few seconds. Then, she shrugged. ‘That’s what she gets for being a slut’” (Johnson 109). While in this excerpt, Sarah has been taken to the hospital because she started feeling pain and worried that something was wrong with the baby. Mrs. Gamble, Sarah’s older brother David, Rhonda, and Sarah’s friends are waiting in the waiting room for news on her condition.

Menefee: “Well, That’s What She Gets...”

Mrs. Gamble finally closed the magazine. “I don’t know why you are getting so worked up over this.” She stood up and fished a pack of cigarettes and a lighter out of her purse. “She wouldn’t even be in this situation if she hadn’t acted like a tramp and slept around.” (Johnson 249)

In both examples, Sarah is called promiscuous, a title hurled at Black women since slavery. Black women face historical characterizations that view them as lacking sexual restraint, which attributes to the number of children they have (Collins, *Black Sexual Politics* 103-104). Both Gail and Mrs. Gamble are Black women themselves and automatically label Sarah as being a slut and a tramp for getting pregnant. There is no blame given to the boy or “boys” she was with, to the lack of sexual education, or even to the possibility of sexual assault. All the blame falls on the Black girl. Collins echoes this sentiment arguing how researchers never look at the other factors that contribute to Black teenage girl pregnancy but instead “assume that the women are incapable of making their own decisions” (Collins, *Black Sexual Politics* 104). In the first excerpt, Gail is at first in disbelief before being dismissive. While in the second excerpt, Mrs. Gamble reaches for a pack of cigarettes to relieve her stress. So, even if they say these things about Sarah, they do not wish her harm or maltreatment. They are reproducing the narrative of the promiscuous Black girl who finds herself pregnant by being in control or lack thereof of her sexuality but deep down, they care.

While Sarah is the direct subject of the discourse around her and has not internalized the negative talk about her. On the other hand, Emoni, in Acevedo’s *With the Fire on High*, has internalized the discourse about her being a fast girl. In the first excerpt, Emoni explains to the reader the label placed on her as “*that girl*,” which is also the title of that chapter. She talks about a part of her experience as a pregnant teen. “Yup. I was *that girl* your moms warn you about

Menefee: “Well, That’s What She Gets...”

being friends with. And warms you about becoming. Not even done with freshman year of high school and already a belly that extended past my toes [...]” (Acevedo 21). In this Acevedo passage, she is washing dishes with her ’Buela, her grandmother on her father’s side with whom she lives. Emoni is talking to her grandmother, who is going to bingo that night, about ’Buela flirting with “cute bingo men” when ’Buela responds.

“You always thinking about boys,” she says, and I can’t tell if she’s serious or not, even though we both know that’s not true. I ignore the tightness that immediately takes up space in my body. Although ’Buela never said anything to make me feel ashamed, I always wonder if she thinks I’m fast... (Acevedo 31)

In these examples, Emoni struggles with being labeled a fast-tailed girl and the ensuing discourse around the label. In the first example, Emoni has fully internalized the label. Instead of trying to distance herself from that label, she actively tells the reader that she is who moms warn their friends about being sexually active and the consequences that come with that. Emoni is living in a sexually conservative society that punishes anyone who does not adhere or participate in actions that resemble the

colonial discourse from the 1600s, the contemporary family values position argues (1) all sexual practices should occur only within the confines of heterosexual marriage; (2) the fundamental purpose of sexuality is procreation; and (3) children should be protected from all sexual information with the exception of abstinence as the preferred form of birth control before marriage. (Collins, *Black Sexual Politics* 37)

In short, she has internalized the societal discourse that she is a “bad” girl that will taint the other girls around her by association. In the second example, even though Emoni’s grandmother is aware of who Emoni is and her personality, she still makes a joke at Emoni’s expense. By saying

Menefee: “Well, That’s What She Gets...”

that Emoni is “always thinking about boys,” her grandmother aligns her with the jezebel stereotype or the original fast girl. Even though it is an untrue statement about her character, Emoni is still left wondering if her grandmother truly sees her this way. Even though that is not who she is, she still feels shame, as if this is a true statement and her grandmother resents her for getting pregnant.

The Choice of Teenage Motherhood

When an adolescent girl is pregnant, there is a decision that she must make. While it goes without saying, these girls deserve to be able to decide on abortion, adoption, or teen motherhood. The three characters within these novels face this choice. While two decide to become teenage mothers, the third has an abortion. Both decisions deserve discussion as both are valid.

In this first example, Rhonda is asking Sarah why she decided to forgo an abortion and continue her pregnancy after telling Sarah’s mother that she would not help persuade Sarah to have the procedure.

“Why didn’t you have the abortion?” I asked. “What made you change your mind?”

Sarah leaned into the banister. “To be honest, I’m not really sure. I guess it was for a lot of reasons.” She frowned. “Why do you ask?”

“I just want to be sure—”

“I’m positive.” Sarah looked me directly in the face. “I’m not having an abortion.”

Suddenly my legs felt like they were made of steel. “That’s what I thought.” (Johnson 171)

Black women in America have been subject to unfair depictions that show them unable to restrain themselves regarding sex and childbearing since the times of slavery (Collins, *Black*

Menefee: "Well, That's What She Gets..."

Sexual Politics 104). While the choice of whether they have children or not has been routinely made for them in the form of repeated rape, forced sterilization, and forced reproductive control (Collins, *Black Sexual Politics* 104). Black women are not supposed to be heard regarding their reproductive choices, as if their voices and opinions about themselves do not count. In the first example, Sarah is speaking up for herself in saying that having her baby is exactly what she wants to do, although it seems that everyone else around her except for Rhonda is okay with it. By stating that she is positive that she is making the right choice, Sarah is proving that she understands the social ramifications of making a choice that bears that much weight.

Rhonda, for her part in this excerpt, is trying to be a good friend and supporting Sarah's decision as she was unable to make her own decisions when it came to her own pregnancy. This line highlights Rhonda's physical response when hearing Sarah's resolve in knowing they were both taking appropriate stances. Sarah is going against everyone's wishes for her and Rhonda in supporting those choices. In siding with Sarah in allowing her to stick with her choice, Rhonda is also taking ownership of herself in knowing that she can have autonomy over her sexual and reproductive choices that have been denied to young Black women for so long (Collins, *Black Sexual Politics* 104).

While Sarah had to face the viciousness of her mother, Emoni had an unfettered choice. In this example from the novel, Emoni has just found out that she is pregnant. When she finally breaks the news to her grandmother, she goes to the free clinic, where they present her with options:

[...] Whether I should have had a baby. And that was probably the hardest decision I've ever made. No one had the right answers [...] Without telling anyone, I went to the free clinic. I sat in the plastic chair. I didn't have a big belly yet, no swollen feet, no one

Menefee: “Well, That’s What She Gets...”

kicking inside me, reminding me of their presence...The nurses at the clinic were so nice.

The doctor treated me like a full adult and told me all the options, all the risks, all the procedures. She didn’t push anything on me, and she also didn’t pity me.

And the only question I kept asking myself was, “Can I do this?” And realized there wasn’t going to be a perfect answer, only the right answer for me. (Acevedo 133-135)

In this narration, Emoni explains to the reader her experience of choosing to continue her pregnancy. In the excerpt, she clearly states that her choice ultimately resided with her. She was fortunate enough to have resources that allowed her to learn about her options. Emoni says, “[The nurse] didn’t push anything on me, and she also didn’t pity me” (Acevedo 135). Two things are essential in this example. The first aspect is that Emoni states that the nurse did not push anything on her, meaning the nurse did not try to coerce Emoni into one way or the other, which is essential. In situations like these, parents or other authority figures have more power to dictate what the girls around them will be able to choose. Emoni exacted the bodily autonomy she deserved in making this decision and deciding to step into motherhood. The second noticeable aspect is when Emoni says, “she also didn’t pity me” (Acevedo 135). The discussion about Black teenage mothers appears to discredit them due to their age, situation, or the fact that they are walking into a quasi-adulthood. After this, Emoni is internally questioning herself if she is up to the task of motherhood, and she determines that she is. Collins notes that while “coping with unwanted pregnancies and being able to care for one’s children is oppressive,” that comes with “personal costs,” it can also be rewarding (*Black Feminist Thought* 211). In the end, she rightfully understands that no matter the personal costs, or oppressions, that decision is her right to make.

Menefee: “Well, That’s What She Gets…”

While Sarah and Emoni had support in their choices, Rhonda did not. In this excerpt, she confronts her father, who essentially forced her to have an abortion. She is left wondering what would have happened if she had been able to choose. Although she does not regret the abortion, she does regret that her father took the choice away from her:

“How long…?”

“Three years,” I said. “Ever since the abortion, I’ve been too afraid to have sex, but I’m still on the goddamn pill.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because it was none of your business.”

“Yes, it is—”

“No, it isn’t,” I said. “You no longer have any say over what I do with my body. That ended on the day you made me get that abortion.”

“We *both* decided that was the best for you to have the procedure.”

“That’s bullshit and you know it.” I marched to him and poked my finger into his chest.

“You forced me to get that abortion.”

Dad’s eyes finally softened. “I had no idea you felt this way.” (Johnson 216-217)

This excerpt is essential in demonstrating the importance of choice. It demonstrates that Black girls and women having the ability to choose if they take birth control, continue a pregnancy, or decide to parent means they are no longer at the mercy of others. Kendall (238) explains that when she was pregnant with her first child, even though she was an adult, the OBGYN asked questions to only her partner, as if he were the patient and not her. Men and boys usually act as the default for making decisions about girls’ and women’s bodies. It could be seen as them trying to protect the women and girls around them (Collins, *Black Sexual Politics* 64). I argue that

Menefee: “Well, That’s What She Gets…”

Rhonda’s father tried to do this for her. Rhonda’s father was trying to protect her from the societal oppression and barriers that comes with teenage motherhood. His singular focus was on Rhonda having an abortion, and not on how she felt about being forced into that choice. Her father was not concerned with what taking away that choice from her had impacted how she felt about her own sexual autonomy or the relationship she had with him. It is not until Rhonda challenges his memory of abortion that her father is able to understand how she truly felt about the ordeal. It is understandable for a parent to try and protect their child at these personal crossroads, but at the same time, that protection should never come at the cost of their child’s wants, desires, or confidence in being a mother.

Implications

It would be remiss not to mention the 2022 reversal of *Roe v. Wade* and the concept of the federally protected right to abortion. Although this article discusses the issue of forced abortion and teenage pregnancy, it also highlights the importance of choice. These are difficult decisions. What needs more discussion is the new normal of forced births, the potential for increased suicide risks, and the continuation of social discourse that shames these girls but also aids in their making decisions about becoming and being sexually active in the first place. Emge argues in her article that sex is everywhere, yet most sexual education is null or focuses solely on abstinence education which is not how our society functions (26). American society has functioned under the marketing strategy of “sex sells” yet frequently teaches our young people to practice abstinence which is of no benefit. Teaching our young people to simply not engage in sex is not going to translate into lower teenage pregnancy rates. Even if adults and politicians tell young adults to essentially dissimulate their sexual feelings does not mean teens are going to. In

Menefee: “Well, That’s What She Gets…”

essence, teenagers are being forced to nestle between the concept of “sex sells” and the conservative ideology of “abstinence saves” and are expected to make sense of it all. In short, young adults determining how to adhere to these discourses, at best, can be described as confusing.

Conclusion

The challenges that Black girls and women face are distinct to what it is like to be a Black girl or Black woman in America. Owens et.al., in their text, explains that Black girlhood is valued and held to the level of importance by those who have gone through it (118). Black girlhood is a distinct combination of multifaceted aspects which includes the building of a sexual identity in the midst of “anti-Blackness, gender violence, criminalization, and hyper-sexualization they face” (Smith-Purviance et.al 69). Black girls and women have had our sexual expressions, sexual expectations, and sexual restrictions preordained for us through centuries long stereotypes and discourses that aids in our continued sexual mistreatment and makes it hard for us to “speak for ourselves” (Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* 134). Black girls matured into Black women understand how our sexual expression, and exploration has been restricted by family, schools, and society. We have seen how the value we hold is on our bodies, not our intelligence, “[b]ecause femininity is so focused on women’s bodies, the value placed on various attributes of female bodies” (Collins, *Black Sexual Politics* 194). Moreover, Black girls should have the power to choose what they do with their body.

Although the novels analyzed here do not encapsulate every perspective of Black teenage pregnancy, they give a glimpse into the importance of reproductive choice. While Rhonda had more opportunities to excel socially, that did not equate to her feeling optimistic after her forced

Menefee: “Well, That’s What She Gets...”

procedure. She supported Sarah to ensure *she* had a choice over what to do with her body. In comparison, Emoni navigates teenage motherhood as she matures into adulthood. The characters and narratives of both novels help us to see and validate the stories of other Black teenage girls who are pressured to pick a side. The novels help us understand the lack of choice, social scrutiny, and othering that comes from being a Black girl who is sexually agentic. It helps to illustrate the notion that “Black women are not free to make choices for themselves” (Simmons 455) but should be able to. Young adult novels like those discussed here tell Black teenage girls that their bodies and what they do with them are their choices and not anyone else’s.

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