

The Violence of Femininity and Beauty Standards: Examining Miel's Identity Struggles in *When the Moon Was Ours*

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Content Warning: Mentions of Self-Harm

When the Moon Was Ours by Anna-Marie McLemore (2016) explores femininity through Miel, a dynamic Latinx girl who protects the people she loves at any cost, even when it places her in dangerous situations. Miel needs that strength because she possesses a strange family trait: roses grow from her wrist. Her roses make her an outcast, but she is also a minority living in a white American society, resulting in white characters being callous towards her. Miel's roses represent different parts of her identity as female/feminine and the difficulties that come with living in a white American society as a Latinx woman. The roses demonstrate how society forces Miel to conform to traditional femininity, subjecting her to both internal and external violence that comes from unattainable social and beauty standards in American society.

Roses as Symbolism

In Europe and the Middle East, roses symbolize femininity because stereotypically they relate to women (Kandeler and Ullrich 3611). Stott states that “floral analogies have been employed to describe various attributes of femininity in art, literature, and thought at least since the Middle Ages” (61). Roses can also represent “virginity, spiritual love, and, above all, the Virgin Mary, who was a ‘rose without thorns’ because she was free of sin” (Graziano 69). This is significant to Catholic-influenced Latinx culture, impacting Miel's conceptualization of femininity through the Virgin Mary's purity and beauty. Roses are charming flowers and embody feminine qualities such as beauty and love (Kandeler and Ullrich 3611)...so why do Miel's roses cause her so much pain?

The roses that Miel grows out of her wrist cause her emotional and physical distress: she struggles with femininity because the roses shape her identity and dictate her place in society. These roses symbolize how beauty causes pain,

relating to the struggle of conforming to societal expectations (B. and Muthusamy 579). Miel experiences intense discomfort when the roses are touched, showing how femininity is an ever-present issue within her life. Since her roses react to even the smallest interaction, such as “pulling on the stem” or “knocking the flower head against a kitchen table” (McLemore 9), they indicate how issues surrounding femininity are essentially inescapable. At times, Miel even rejects these roses, for example trying to remove them from her wrist: “She poised the scissors low, close to her skin, and snapped the blades shut. Pain shivered along her veins. It found her heart and her stomach and everything in her that was alive” (26–27). In this explicit and vulnerable scene, Miel chooses to violently extract the roses out of her body rather than live with them. Miel’s self-harm shows how she is unhappy with her identity being tied to the feminine roses because her body that does not align with the identity she wishes to project.

The beauty standard, which is nearly impossible to achieve, causes Miel to have self-confidence issues. We can tell that the roses represent beauty standards because Miel compares them to hair. Hair is a common way of expressing gender that can be heavily criticized, since certain styles and colours are deemed more beautiful than others. Miel states, “the petals themselves were like her hair, rooted in her, but not the same kind of alive as her skin” (9). Because the roses are “rooted” in her, they are part of her the same way that her hair is, but they are not necessarily providing a biological function like her skin does, thus connecting her femininity and gender expression with her physical appearance.

Miel associates her hair with negative qualities and believes it is less attractive because “Her hair was the dark, damp earth” (12), revealing her self-confidence struggles. We also see her insecurities when she refers to the Bonner Sisters’ hair as “a forest of autumn trees” (4), “bright” (16), and “fire-haired” (19). The Bonner Sisters’ hair is almost always associated with positive and bright words, the opposite of how Miel describes her own hair. Even though hair colour preference is subjective, Miel’s physical appearance is placed below the Bonner Sisters since they fit the beauty standard.

Along with comparing her roses to hair, Miel connects their colour to lipstick, something that is historically and stereotypically used by women to enhance their appearance and to appeal to beauty standards. Miel frequently refers to her roses as “lipstick-colored” such as, “the one on her wrist was now as dark pink as her favorite lipstick” (8), and “the pink of her favorite lipstick was draining out of the petals, giving way to red, and then orange, until every petal had turned to copper or amber or rust” (23). The narrator most often describes Miel’s roses as pink,

associating them with stereotypical femininity. Since makeup changes a person's physical appearance, by connecting her roses with lipstick, Miel is acknowledging that the roses impact her outward appearance. However, like makeup, Miel's roses fail to alleviate her insecurities, proving that stereotypical femininity is inescapable.

Her biological family also saw them as a feminine curse affecting women in her father's lineage. For women such as Miel who struggle with their identity, femininity can be a curse, due to society pressuring them to conform to an unattainable ideal. The roses impact Miel and her deceased mother because the children who grow roses out of their wrists are destined to "turn on their mothers" (43). Miel's mother even went as far as saying that the roses were a "petaled demon" (158). Because Miel's roses are referred to as a curse and a demon, they represent negative qualities despite being physically beautiful. Society has taught women they need to strive for a certain standard, when—in reality—femininity can be very damaging due to the pressures to conform to an impossible ideal. Femininity is beautiful and creates violent responses.

External Societal Factors that Impact Miel's Identity

Miel does not conform to traditional femininity, and society judges her due to her lack of feminine qualities, resulting in an internal battle between how she acts and how society wants her to act. McLemore emphasizes this by her being a Latinx woman living in a white American society, since she does not have fully European features. In her book titled *From Bananas to Buttocks: The Latina Body in Popular Film and Culture*, Myra Mendible states that "In the United States, the Latina body has signed in for somatic differences (body type, coloring, facial features) and differences in culture, class, language, religion, and sexuality. Consistently, its sign value has been linked to ideological currents, economic conditions, and political expediency" (7). Due to the somatic differences that Mendible mentions, Miel faces discrimination for being both a woman and a person of colour. Through an intersectional lens, she faces different societal challenges in comparison to white women, including the Bonner Sisters.

Many characters in the novel have negative preconceived notions about Miel and her caretaker Aracely. Despite Aracely helping people with her magic, they call her *bruja*, witch, an insulting term in this context. American society misinterprets and misuses Miel and Aracely's culture and language, causing Miel to have not only issues with femininity, but with her Latinx identity and heritage, too. Both her roses and her cultural heritage make her displaced and different.

Unwriting & Queering

McLemore's narrator describes Miel as a "little careless" and "unpolished," as well as not wearing makeup other than lipstick (148). These traits make her less feminine from society's perspective. Pickens and Braun state, "Even women who resisted and challenged these strict and limiting social norms of (hetero) femininity were still subject to them, negotiating their sense of gendered personhood" (446). Even though Miel resists certain societal expectations placed upon her, she still feels society's rejection of her identity, causing her to have an internal battle between how she wants to act and how society wants her to act.

The violence that society imposes on Miel and her roses is also something we can associate with violence caused by femininity. The Bonner Sisters stealing her roses shows them policing her femininity through external violence. The sisters claim ownership over Miel's body because she is less feminine and a minority in a white society. Even though the Bonner Sisters are women, the same as Miel, they have certain privileges that Miel does not, such as whiteness and fitting into the beauty standard. They take advantage of Miel without repercussions.

The Bonner Sisters are selfish manipulators, and, unfortunately, Miel is a traumatized victim of their abuse. Mendible states, "More often than not it is the bodies of Women of Color that are controlled, patrolled, and ideologically disciplined through legal and cultural discourses" (118). Since the Bonner Sisters try to steal Miel's roses and even try to cut them from her body, they are policing her identity and controlling her femininity. They also use their own femininity as a weapon and create a hierarchy based on societal beauty standards, with Miel at the bottom, making her powerless in violent situations.

Miel's Internal Self-Consciousness

Miel's femininity is very fragile when she compares herself to other women's appearances. For example, she thinks of Sam's mother as a "beautiful, kohl-eyed woman" (110), Aracely as "beauty and goodness" (26), and the Bonner sisters as "older, and beautiful, their eyes a fierce and fearless kind of open" (12). Miel is attentive to the appearances of others, describing their looks using feminizing words such as "beautiful." However, Miel is critical of her own body. Miel thinks she is not beautiful because she has stolen her mother's beauty but not used it for herself (195). Miel is judgmental of her physical traits because society has constantly told her that she is less feminine, making her believe that she is not beautiful.

Unwriting & Queering

Living in a white American society has impacted Miel's relationship with her female body. She compares herself to the Bonner Sisters, who fit into the white Eurocentric standard of beauty that Miel does not. They are pale, having red hair, blue eyes, and voluptuous curves, the opposite of Miel's body because she "did not stretch out a shirt like the Bonner sisters" (12). Even though breasts are related to biological sex and not gender expression, they are stereotypically associated with femininity. Miel does not have the ideal body that America advertises, which is thin but not too thin, while still having large breasts. Society's criticism of Miel's identity reinforces her bodily insecurities, resulting in internalized issues with her race and femininity.

When she experiences traumatic situations, self-harm acts as a way for her to regain control in her life and perhaps provides a sense of comfort. Self-harming is often a more feminine behaviour, as women are more likely to self-harm than men (Straiton et al. 30). It is also a way for people to communicate their distress (30), which is applicable to Miel as she struggles with expressing her emotions. Miel is part of a high-risk group because of her age: "women engage in self-harming more frequently than men in many Western countries, particularly in younger age groups" (29). Feminine gender roles and negative insecurities are also associated with the risk of self-harming (Straiton et al. 37, 40), meaning Miel is more vulnerable because of her self-consciousness and identity struggles. Because Miel cannot control how society perceives her, self-harm acts as a way for Miel to have agency in her life despite the dangerous outcomes of bodily mutilation.

Conclusion

The novel ends with Miel reaching an epiphany, leading her to see things objectively rather than subjectively. Her relationships with other women change, as she realizes her mother loved her, Aracely is her long-lost sister, and the Bonner Sisters are not perfect nor do they act as a unit. Acknowledging the Bonner Sisters' individuality shows that femininity takes on different forms. There is no proper femininity, because even women who fit the beauty standard have their own problems. The Bonner Sisters, like Miel, struggle in society, because Peyton Bonner likes girls and Chloe Bonner has issues with her baby and post-pregnancy. Even though the women in the novel have different conflicts, they share similar societal pressures, creating a (limited) sense of camaraderie and community.

Unwriting & Queering

After the climax of the novel, Miel's hair turns red, indicating an identity transformation both physically and mentally. She breaks society's control as she becomes more open-minded and less self-conscious. However, Miel's change in mindset may be caused by her change in body: "Miel's [hair] had turned so red that, when her skin was lighter in winter, at a distance, she could almost pass for one of the Bonner sisters" (261). Now that Miel fits the beauty standard more, society is less critical of her appearance. This can be problematic because Miel's identity acceptance depends on how society treats her. Miel's feminine experience illustrates the binary between how society wants women to be, and the struggles and hardships of women learning to accept themselves.

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