

The Stories We Tell

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The Stories We Tell

Two or Three Things I Know for Sure tells the story of Dorothy Allison as she comes to terms with her past and strives to move beyond it, to be empowered and embodied by it. In this short memoir, Allison explores the relationship she has with her mother and how that relationship has influenced her individuality and character. Her mother does not help Allison find out who she is. Instead, her mother's complacency restricts Allison. Allison breaks away from the stories she has been told to tell a new story of abuse and disembodiment in which she finds love, and in turn, embodiment; the unification of her body and spirit. Story-telling and writing is a form of self-love, and self-love leads to embodiment. In this essay, I will explore three novels and the women's lives the stories tell. I will look at *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure* by Dorothy Allison, *Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood, and *The Woman Warrior* by Maxine Hong Kingston. These three novels tell the stories of women who must break away from their seemingly complacent mothers and their lifestyle to find unity within their self and body.

In an essay on her idea *écriture féminine* called "The Laugh of the Medusa", Helene Cixous argues that women need to write and tell stories to find their voice and identity. Further, she says that "by writing herself, woman will return to the body which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display" (Cixous 8). This advances the idea that embodiment comes from finding your voice. Embodiment is individuality and is understood in terms of the body's

unification with the idea of self, or the soul. If a person feels detached from the body, their idea of self and body not united, they cannot experience individuality. This is disembodiment. Cixous says that disembodiment is something that women can overcome by writing and telling their stories. In all three of these stories, the women talk of different kinds of abuse that have kept them from love, which ultimately cannot be had until self-love is attained. As they dig to the root of this abuse, they each analyze the relationship they have with their mothers and how those relationships have evolved through their journey to find themselves.

As a backdrop for the argument that telling stories brings embodiment is Dorothy Allison's memoir *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure*. In a world where Allison and her family were defined as "the lower orders, the great unwashed, the working class, the poor, proletariat, trash, lowlife, and scum," she broke through to define herself as an individual outside of these stereotypes (Allison 1). She stated: "In the world as I remade it, nothing was forbidden; everything was possible" (Allison 2). And so she tells a story of the world she has remade in which she "[threw] in some real stuff, [changed] a few details, [and added] the certainty of outrage... The story [became] the thing needed" for her to come to terms with her own life (Allison 3). Throughout her memoir, Allison revisits scenes of pain in order to later visit scenes of love. The reader meets Allison in this pain of knowing how she should act, who she should be, and choosing to fight it, unlike her mother and her suggestion to do so.

At the heart of this pain is the lack of identity, the separation from the body, and ultimately, the disembodiment by men. The start of Allison's memoir states that the stories she is telling are part true and part untrue. Within that is a "story that is in no part fiction" because it is a story that repeats itself in history and not just in her own life and the lives of the women she loves (Allison 49). This is "the story of the female body taught to hate itself" because of how it

was treated, how it was devoid of pleasure, and how it never had a sense of unity with the self (Allison 49). Allison comes to terms with this fact about herself as she explores the various relationships she has had with women and how they resemble the relationship she had with her abusive stepfather. It “took [her] a long time to grow up and stop falling in love with women who treat [her] bad,” and even in the moment she says that to her sister she recognizes that she has not yet accomplished that (Allison 54). From her family experience, she had no real sense of what it meant to love and to be loved because to love meant to be trapped in abuse and neglect, just like the women in her family were. She was imprisoned in “the inept female body” (Allison 63). All she really understood was sex, her body, and how to please other women by getting them to tell stories of themselves. This kept her from love, of others, her body, and herself, which she thought to be dangerous.

In the dystopic Gilead of Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, women are devoid of sexual desire and seen as only bodies used for the sole purpose of reproduction. The absence of pleasure in sex creates a sense of disembodiment in all the handmaids, just like the absence of pleasure in the ‘sex’ Allison experienced as a child, which created disunity in her body and self. Offred recognizes her longing for something real, for love, and wonders: “Can I be blamed for wanting a real body, to put my arms around? Without it I too am disembodied” (Atwood 128). Without love, there is no individuality. Without individuality, there is no desire or passion, and the body is just a shell used for sex, rendering any other part useless. This resides with the abuse Allison experienced from her stepfather. Her body was used for his sexual pleasure and not her own. When the Commander and Offred are having intercourse, “[she] does not say making love, because this is not what he’s doing. Copulating too would be inaccurate because it would imply two people and only one is involved” (Atwood 94). Offred recognizes that she is not involved in

this action at all, the Commander is simply “fucking the lower part of [her] body.” This is rape, sexual abuse without Offred’s desires involved, just like the rape and abuse that Allison experienced from her stepfather in which there is also no love and just he is involved. In these moments, there is no intimacy, and no desire for either Allison or Offred to enjoy the intercourse.

The most ultimate sense of disembodiment in *The Woman Warrior* comes from Kingston’s relationship with her mother and the code she lives by called necessity. This guarantees only the information needed to know and nothing else. This leads Kingston’s mother to leave out names of family members because their family pretends they never existed, seeing as they were disgraces to their family. This is similar to how Allison’s mother remains silent in regards to the names of their family members when Allison inquires more. As Kingston dives deeper into this battle of finding out who she really is in her own culture and now in American culture, she realizes she must put together the missing pieces of these stories and rewrite them as her own in order to unify all aspects of her life. This is something Allison battles with as well. She knows this to be true: “that to go on living I have to tell stories, that stories are the one sure way I know to touch the heart and change the world” (Allison 72). And ultimately, Kingston is trying to challenge or change the stigma that Chinese- American females have by creating a cyclical view of her family history in terms of herself. This search for individuality will break away from necessity and explore extravagance which encourages self-actualization and will lead to embodiment.

Unlike Allison, her “mama did not run away” (Allison 4). She, like the other woman family members in her life, “learned resilience and determination and the cost of hard compromises” (Allison 5). Her mother married an abusive man and chose to stay with him, even though she knew he was abusing Allison and her sisters. Allison wished her mother didn’t know,

and knew that she needed “to say that [her] mama didn’t know what was going on” in order for her to be able to move forward (Allison 42). She has to believe that her mother didn’t know because she doesn’t want to live with the idea that her mother knew and never did anything to stop it. This lack of action corresponds with her mother’s lack of knowledge on their family’s history because both show that she has a lack of ambition, respect for herself, and an understanding that her job is not to speak up but to do as she is told. In regards to the women in her family, Allison says that “none of them ever intended to lose their lives or their children’s lives, to be trapped by those hard compromises and ground down until they no longer knew who they were, what they had first intended” (Allison 5). Her mother’s own lack of self-identity, her own disembodiment, led Allison to start her life already disembodied with no sense of self or belonging. And at the root of this brokenness is the brokenness she sees in her mother. Allison’s mother was silent, she didn’t tell stories, and thus, could not come to terms with her own story of who she was. And even though she loved the broken women in her life, they horrified her and she “did not want to grow up to be them,” and prayed that the Lord would “not let [her] become them” (Allison 38). Allison respected them but strived to break away from the complacency they subjected themselves to in allowing their self and their body to be pulled apart. She does this by telling her story.

Offred, just like Allison, does not want to turn into her mother. Offred recalls a time when she went to an anti-porn demonstration with her mother. She was handed a magazine and, in reaction to what she has been told by her mother about how poorly these magazines represented women, “[she] threw the magazine into the flames. It riffled open in the wind of its burning; big flakes of paper came loose, sailed into the air, still on fire, parts of women’s bodies, turning to black ash, in the air, before [her] eyes” (Atwood 39). At this point in the novel, the

reader does not know exactly what happens in the Ceremony process. This response foreshadows moments where Offred will literally watch her body being treated like paper, like nothing, right before her eyes, just as these images of women were in the fire. At this moment in recalling the demonstration, it is made clear to the reader that Offred's mother played a part in her own daughter's disembodiment. What was once a peaceful act of protest, has now become a reality: women's bodies are separated from their sense of self, and abused and 'burned' by the government. Further, the liberty of not wanting a child is taken for granted in her new world where reproducing is the only thing that matters. In some ways, once the dysfunction of Gilead was at rise, Offred grew to admire her mother even though things were not always easy between them. When reflecting on their relationship, she states: "She expected too much of me... expected me to vindicate her life for her, and the choices she'd made" (Atwood 122). But Offred didn't want to live that way with her life defined by her mother's terms. She "didn't want to be the model offspring, the incarnation of her [mother's] ideas" because that meant being stubborn, and embracing an ideal that love essentially did not exist, as displayed in her mother's desire for children only and no husband to love and take care of her.

Through various talk-stories and the speaker's coming of age, the memoir develops a relationship in which her mother serves as a role model in her bravery and wit, but also as a woman who strives to abide by the same standards set for females in China centuries ago. This memoir delves into the confusion and questions the speaker has about her mother. In *The Woman Warrior*, the beginning of the story is her mother's while the ending belongs to her. This is the general idea of Allison's memoir as well. She starts with the things she knows from the stories her mother has told and concludes with her own story of empowerment. This empowerment is seen in the end of *The Woman Warrior* when Kingston speaks up against her mother saying "Do

you hear me? I may be ugly and clumsy, but... there's nothing wrong with my brain" (Kingston 201). For the first time, she has acknowledged her voice and challenges her mother to listen to her instead of the other way around. And like Allison recognizes the 'ugliness' of the people where she comes from, Kingston recognizes that she might not be the epitome of beauty and grace, but that she is the epitome of extravagance. Kingston embraces the individualistic culture that allows her to satisfy her private desires away from her mother's ideals to embrace submissive, Chinese culture.

The Handmaid's Tale was originally an oral tale that Offred recorded. It was then later translated, written down, and interpreted by academics. Similarly, *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure* was meant to be performed orally, complimented by pictures of her family in a slideshow. As is the case with any story that was originally told one way and then presented another, detail can get lost or changed in translation. Similarly, *The Woman Warrior* is in the genre 'talk-story', and is composed of stories that Kingston was told orally by her mother. The disconnect between the original and the version we hear mirrors the disconnect between the soul and body in a person, something all three main character's experience in their journey to embodiment. A lot of this disconnect has to do with the relationships these women have with their mothers. All the stories Kingston knows are from her mother. However, she must rewrite them to fill the silent gaps her mother left in generations (ie. Inability to name family members or their stories). On the other hand, Allison's mother is completely silent and doesn't share any stories with her daughter. It is therefore up to Allison to write her own stories, aside from the rumors she has heard of her family, in order to fill the silence that her mother left. Lastly, Offred was told by her mother that she was completely unwanted, and Offred grew up watching her single mother participate in anti-porn and pro-abortion demonstrations, by which she was

embarrassed. Now it is up to Offred to determine her identity in a culture that values birth and the materialization of women's bodies more than anything. Like Helene Cixous says in her essay, these women must tell their story and write in order to fill the silence and reunite their body and self.

Allison uses a brick wall as a metaphor for her life. The bricks are the individual stories that come together to make one wall, one story, that she is trying to argue is not her story. The brick wall is a 'mean story'. It's the story of one woman who carries "all the stories [she] has ever been told, women [she] has known, women who have taken damage until they tell themselves they can feel no pain at all," like a brick wall taking a blow (Allison 38). This brick wall is symbolic of the lies she is told, but that she will no longer believe are true. And just like behind the wall is a true story of a girl trying to find who she really is, "behind the story you hear is the one [she] wishes [she] could make you hear," the story she doesn't tell (Allison 39). And on the other side of this wall that she tried to climb over to find who she really was, is the rape and abuse she experienced. This was the side she was stuck on. Surrounding this brick wall is the repeated use of binary pairs as a way of describing the two halves of her life that she's "not supposed to put together" (Allison 45). These binary pairs include what she is not supposed to talk about: "sex and violence, love and hatred" (Allison 45), because that meant talking about how it started with uncles who "boasted of girls they'd had and men they'd get, ass they'd kick and trouble they'd make... want[ing] legend and adventure" (Allison 28). Men like this left women "hurt and terrible. Pained and desperate. Mean and angry. Hungry and unable to say what they needed" (Allison 50). These were the women like Allison and the ones she tried to fix. These binary pairs show the disconnect of self and body.

Where there are binary pairs and the wall, there is no love. But when the wall starts to break apart and there are places for her to break through to the other side, there is unity with self and body and no more binary pairs. One of these places is when she first starts to understand love with a woman who was leaving her. Allison “barely stopped [herself] from begging her to stay,” and it is in this moment that she feels “tender and fragile and hungry for something besides dispassionate curiosity” (Allison 58). There are no binary pairs, just three simple words (tender, fragile, and hungry), all amounting to love. As she and a friend start attending karate classes where they are surrounded by men, Allison is overwhelmed with the view of the instructor’s wife. She has an “astonishingly perfected female body,” and was “showing [them] all what a woman could do” (Allison 63). It is at this moment that Allison understands that this woman has a “love that yearned as much for the spirit as for the body,” and that this was what she wanted too (Allison 63). Watching this woman made her fall in love with her own body, allowing the self she has developed through talk-story to be unified with the body she has felt detached from. This complete unification process happened in her experiences with karate: “All I gained was a sense of what I might do, could do if I worked at it, a sense of my body as my own” (Allison 66). In the concluding pages of her memoir, she has a dream where the brick wall begins to break down. Rape is no longer the wall separating her from unification of her spirit, just the beginning of the story that helped her break down this wall.

“Two or three things I know for sure and one of them is that telling the story all the way through is an act of love” (Allison 90). Allison story-talked as a way of survival growing up. Her memoir starts by saying, “let me tell you a story,” and then tells the story of her life as it has been defined by her past, and how she has come to see it since telling the story (Allison 1). This parallels with Kingston’s approach in writing *The Woman Warrior*, which she defines as a ‘talk-

story' narrative. Further, Atwood's story of a handmaid is orally telling her story of how she was seen as just a body is contiguous with the idea of 'talk-story'. This mode of story-telling allows the women in these novels to be liberated from the emptiness and lack of love in disembodiment. Mother daughter relationships ultimately play a big role in whether or not women will know themselves and become embodied. And, no matter the outcome of the process of embodiment, part of you will never be able to break away from your mother and the things she instilled in you. This is demonstrated in the parts that Allison and her sister hold onto of their mother, the stories that Kingston keeps from her mother, and in Offred realizing her mother did all she could with what she had. It is in realizing these things that will allow these women to find and feel love. Allison has found love in her partner and child by first loving herself and coming to terms with her past. Kingston has denounced her Chinese-American stereotype to love herself, despite the criticism from the white, American world around her. We can only hope that Offred finds some solace. But we do know that she has the knowledge of how to embody herself and feel loved if she ever escapes from the abusive structure of Gilead. The strength it took for these women to tell their stories and to overcome their past, is the way we are unified in body in spirit through self-love.

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