

The State of Black Women: An ongoing Love Drought

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Beyoncé Giselle Knowles-Carter is one of the most well known and influential music artists in the world. For over twenty years Beyoncé has dominated the music industry, by recording six solo albums, winning twenty-two grammy awards, and delivering spectacular visual and audio performances. It is through all of these achievements, and more, that she has defined herself as not only a performer, but as an activist, advocate, and icon of black excellence, existence, and power. For years Beyoncé's canon has served as a platform for highlighting issues within and facing the black community. Scholars, music critiques, and the general population alike have analyzed and interpreted her work in order to understand these issues and the role they play in society. One of the biggest issues Beyoncé highlights is power dynamics and the role of women within black relationships. The song *Love Drought*, from the album *Lemonade*, is a depiction of black romantic relationships, unequal power structures within the black community, and the perpetuated inferiority of black women.

Love Drought, the seventh track on Beyoncé's sixth studio album, opens in the same manner as the rest of the songs on the album's same titled feature film. A mixture of black and white and colored scenes of Beyoncé in various New Orleans locations shows as you hear a voice over of her reciting poem lines from Warsan Shire. The twenty nine year old British poet's works were used throughout the film as a theme catalyst and narration. Warsan shire is the daughter of Somali parents and was born in Kenya. Her poems reflect themes of immigration and experiences shared by unheard and marginalized groups of people. In *Love Drought* the Warsan Shire lines used introduce the theme of "Reformation" and fixing a broken system and relationship. The lines read, "Why do you deny yourself heaven? Why do you consider yourself undeserving? Why are you afraid of love? You think it's not possible for someone like you. But you

are the love of my life.” These questions while presumed to be addressed to a partner, in Beyoncé’s case her husband Jay-Z, they also can be interpreted as the speaker asking herself why she considers herself underserving of love. The speaker asks herself, why she allows the the unfaithfulness and disrespect from her partner to continue, when she is capable of receiving the upmost form of love, affection and praise. The song is asking for a shift in attitude in the way black relationships are viewed. Specifically the reformation of black female roles in relationships.

Like most Beyoncé songs, any listener’s first interpretation of the lyrics are not always what they appear to be. Upon hearing *Love Drought* listeners are quick to assume the song is about Beyoncé’s confrontation of Jay-Z’s alleged infidelity. Claiming that she knows she’s been mistreated in a relationship that could have been so much more. However, the song is actually about the disrespect one of the song’s writers, Ingrid Burley, received from the label. In an interview with Genius Burley, who has worked on multiple of Beyoncé’s projects and is a childhood friend, explained that *Love Drought* is about the deceitful relationship she has with Parkwood Entertainment. The song’s lines, “Ten times out of nine, I know you’re lying / But nine times out of ten, I know you're trying / So I'm trying to be fair,” are Burley straight up saying she is aware of the mistreatment she receives and is still trying to convince herself that everything is still okay. She then goes on to explain that work she does goes unrecognized and that she really is hurting from it, “All the loving I've been giving goes unnoticed ... Are you aware you're my life-line, are you tryna kill me?” This same notion of mistreatment of women within a relationship is expressed in Crunkista’s letter to the Patriarchy in *The Crunk Feminist Collection*. In the letter Crunkista writes, “You are stifling. controlling, oppressive, and you never had my best interests at heart. You tricked me into believing that things are the way they are because they have to

be.” (pg. 13) This means that whatever assumes the “dominant” role in the relationship, the patriarchy, the music industry bosses, men, it will hurt those who are deemed lesser and more expendable. Consistently black women find themselves inferior to this system that attacks and belittles their worth, all the while making them believe it was their fault. Burley’s song is not only a reflection of this form of oppression but a public callout to reform and fix it.

While *Love Drought* can be directly interpreted the way its writer intended it to be, it can also be looked at through the lens of Beyoncé and Jay-Z’s and other black romantic relationships. Much like professional relationships, romantic relationships within the black community also display toxic power structures that harm black women. Beyoncé sings the lines, “Nine times out of ten, I’m in my feelings / But ten times out of nine, I’m only human / Tell me, what did I do wrong,” because she still wants to believe her emotions are valid and she is told that they aren’t. In her article *Black Love is Not a Fairytale*, Associate Professor of Women, Gender, and Sexuality studies at Washington University Rebecca Wanzo explains this feeling of not listening to your feelings. She explains that, “African American women are still emasculating monsters, but now they are also delusional.” (Wanzo, pg. 11) This is the notion that Black women are too emotional and written off as “crazy” or “irrational.” That even within their own communities and in relationships with their own partner a black women’s personal emotions do not warrant a significant enough change. This is important to note when understanding black romantic relationships because it is often under appreciated how deeply black women have valued relationships with black men. Patricia Hill Collins, professor of Sociology at the University of Maryland and writer of *Black Feminist Thought*, describes this as, “The great love Black women feel for Black men.” (Hill Collins, pg. 152) Collins explains that this love has been rooted within the black

community since the emancipation of slaves, when free women would write narratives about trying to find their lost sons, fathers, and partners. She also refers to the notion that, “Black women reject feminism because they see it as being antifamily and against Black men.” (Hill Collins, pg. 152) It is has become falsely ingrained in women’s minds that protecting a damaged black man is more important than loosing or trying to fix him. This is reflected perfectly in the song’s lines, “Spend my life in the dark for the sake of you and me / Only way to go is up, skin thick, too tough.” At this point in the relationship she can not be beaten down emotionally any more than she already has. She is tired but she has been convinced that it will be worth it in the end.

One of the great aspects of Beyoncé’s music is that it more often than not has a visual component to it. In the case of Love Drought there are the visuals from the Lemonade album and 2017 Grammy performance. In the Lemonade video Beyoncé is seen leading other black women in a strait line into the ocean. Dressed in the same white dress the follow her every move with a blank face ending later with them holding hands in the air and then bringing them back down. This highlights the community between black women that is created through their many shared lived experiences. In the collective article and study journal *Black Women, Gender + Families*, author Ebony A. Utley collects the personal narratives of black women who have suffered infidelity from their black male partners. In her study Utley notes that most research into this topic, “Frequently normalize black infidelity by focusing on why men cheat, public apologies from men who have strayed, and salacious details from mistresses.” (Utley, pg. 66-67) By addressing this topic in this way researchers completely disregard the experiences of the women who went and continue to suffer through this. In her study Utley gathers black women together and has them not only share their stories but reflect and relate with each other and create that needed

community. Beyoncé choosing to depict images of black female connectedness rather than isolation during this song is important to the survival of the black women. She serves as not only inspiration but as a guiding figure saying who understands exactly what they go through and is with them in support.

While Beyoncé holds the title as one of the most influential music performers in the world, it is important to remember that she is black and she is a woman. Her power, and image, and influence is a cultivation of not only her own lived experiences but of the experiences and narratives that of most black women in society. Like most of her songs Love Drought serves to depict, reflect, and redefine what these experiences, specifically black relationships have done to underserve black women. From the politics of unequal power dynamics to the lack of emotional validity within romantic partnerships, black women have been and are unfortunately continuing to be overlooked.

Works Cited

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