

The Jezebel Stereotype

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Abstract

This paper is a part of a series of articles dedicated to the historical stereotypes existing towards African American women. Stereotypical archetypes that has been used in the past include mammy (a southern slang term for a Black woman who were considered the portly, asexual, and fierce caretakers), jezebel (a concept revolving around Black women who were often portrayed as innately promiscuous, even predatory), and sapphire (Black women who are portrayed as rude, loud, malicious, stubborn, and overbearing) (West, 1995). Unfortunately, those stereotypes have negatively affected the image of African American women in a society and have been assimilated into the Black culture. The Jezebel's reputation is established in the bible, as a murderer, prostitute, and an enemy of God. A close reading of the biblical text articulates that for more than two thousand years, Jezebel has been seen as the "bad girl of the Bible, the wickedest of women," (Gaines, 2013). The representation of African American women as immoral Jezebels can also be the result of cultural and environmental differences between Africans and Anglo Saxons. There is a belief that English slave traders misinterpreted polygamy as a sign of their uncontrolled desires and their lack of coverage as eroticism.

Keywords: Jezebel, stereotypes, racism, African American women

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Introduction

This paper is a part of a series of articles dedicated to the historical stereotypes existing towards African American women. Stereotypical archetypes that has been used in the past include mammy (a southern slang term for a Black woman who were considered the portly, asexual, and fierce caretakers), jezebel (a concept revolving around Black women who were often portrayed as innately promiscuous, even predatory), and sapphire (Black women who are portrayed as rude, loud, malicious, stubborn, and overbearing) (West, 1995).

Unfortunately, those stereotypes have negatively affected the image of African American women in a society and have been assimilated into the Black culture...The Jezebel stereotype endures with the hyper-sexualization of Black female characters in contemporary entertainment media who are disproportionately dressed in provocative clothing (Maestro & Greenberg, 2000, pp. 44, 690-703) and otherwise hyper-sexualized (Tukachinsky et al., 2015). The racist Welfare Queen trope that emerged in the 1980s painted Black women as having many children while being sexually promiscuous, lazy, and dependent on the state for financial support, can be regarded as a recent embodiment of the Jezebel Stereotype.

Early History of the Jezebel Stereotype

The Jezebel's reputation is established in the bible, as a murderer, prostitute, and an enemy of God. A close reading of the biblical text articulates that for more than two thousand years, Jezebel has been seen as the "bad girl of the Bible, the wickedest of women," (Gaines, 2013).

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English slave traders misinterpreted polygamy as a sign of their uncontrolled desires and their lack of coverage as eroticism. Morton believes that the Jezebel image evolved into a stereotype for African American women during slavery and it was used as means to justify the sexual and racial abuse on behalf of the slave owner (Morton, 1991). Additionally, she also highlights that enslaved women usually worked in shabby clothes, often revealing of their legs, chest, and arms. During auctions, they were undressed in order to check their physical form, i.e. their ability to do hard work... By using the label of the Jezebel, slave owners got off free for sexually abusing their slaves. The image bears with it the characteristic of a sexual animal, never satisfied and always wanting more, meaning that slave owners had no legal repercussions for raping and violating their female slaves (ibid.). Other contributing factors to the promiscuous image of African American women were frequent pregnancies that occurred mostly as a consequence of rape and sexual abuse (Simms, 2001).

The Jezebel was portrayed as a black woman with a greedy appetite for sex. She was not satisfied with black men. There was a belief that Jezebel desired sexual relations with white men; hence, white men did not have to rape black women. According to Redpath (1859), the slave women were "gratified by the criminal advances of Saxons" (Redpath, 1859, p. 141). Frederick Douglass claimed that the "slave woman is at the mercy of the fathers, sons or brothers of her master"(Douglass, 1968, p. 60). It must be noted that Douglass was a former slave himself and his reasoning is consistent with the stories of other former slaves.

As White notes out, Emancipation and Reconstruction did not stop the sexual victimization of Black women. From the end of the Civil War to the mid-1960s, no Southern white male was convicted of raping or attempting to rape a black woman; yet, the crime was common (White, 1999, p. 188). Black women, especially in the South or border states, had

little legal recourse when raped by white men, and many black women were reluctant to report their sexual victimization by black men for fear that the black men would be lynched (ibid.).

Although the Civil War brought slavery to an end, the stereotypes (Jezebel, Mammy, and Sapphire) towards African American women persisted. Many of the racist beliefs and systems that started these stereotypes in the first place stayed very similar in the decades following in the Civil War, or changed while still promoting the same ideals. The economic opportunities for Black people post-Civil War was only a minimal step up from slavery. Additionally, many people during this time period still believed that Black people were biologically inferior to whites. These factors backed the endurance of these stereotypes in an attempt to retain control over the behavior of the newly free Black population. The following decades brought almost no changes. Moreover, World War I, the Great Depression, and World War II in a way, delayed issues related to racial injustices.

1950s - 1970s. The period between **1950s** – **1970s** in America was characterized by change. The country was involved in the Cold War and the Vietnam Wars. In addition, the social movements segregation was prevalent, along with flagrant racial discrimination. The Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s sought to change this, and succeed in many ways. *Brown v. Board* desegregated public schools and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 helped protect the right to the vote from racial discrimination. Despite the significant social progress that was made during the Civil Rights Movement, the incredible backlash that it received also illuminated the deeply rooted racism that many Americans still embraced.

It was in 1960s when racial polarization entered the political field and still remains there, up to this day. According to McAdam & Kloos, the Civil Rights Movement sparked an intense countermovement often called “white resistance” or

“white backlash,” this movement soon spread all over the country (McAdam & Kloos, 2014).

Negative stereotypes that originated during slavery were still being disseminated via political propaganda, advertisements, and television and were sometimes amplified due to the growing white resistance to measures being taken for civil rights.

Racists promoted and exploited a fear of integration, which also worsened existing stereotypes about African Americans. New integration measures meant that public spaces such as schools and restaurants were now open to all races. The sentiment coming from white people resisting integration often fell along the lines of Black people being “dirty/ dangerous.” Especially in the school setting, racist white parents expressed fears that their children would be corrupted by the presence of Black students. This association of impurity with Black people contributed to the Jezebel stereotype, which paints Black women as being inherently promiscuous. Even after the Civil Rights Movement died down and the US had moved into the 1970s, this hyper-sexualized image remained (Loft, 2020).

When progress was made post-Civil Rights Movement, influential Black artists able to capitalize on this hyper-sexualization. Many famous Black artists at the time were using this imagery in the name of sexual liberation, however this kind of imagery was reinforcing the original harmful stereotypes rather than presenting a new empowered representation. (Hooks, 1992)

In its turn, Blaxploitation movies also contributed to the to the persistence of Jezebel. These movies (mainly B-grade films) allegedly depicted realistic black experiences; however, many were produced and directed by whites. As Leab illustrated, “Whites packaged, financed, and sold these films, and they received the bulk of the big money” (Leab, 1976, p. 259).

The blaxploitation movies dealt with corrupt police and politicians, pimps, drug dealers, violent criminals, prostitutes, and whores. Mostly these movies were low-budget, formulaic interpretations of black life by white producers, directors, and distributors. Black actors and actresses, many unable to find work in mainstream movies, found work in blaxploitation movies. Black patrons supported these movies because they showed blacks fighting the "white establishment," resisting police corruption, acting assertively, and having sex lives. (Pilgrim, 2012)

The film which ushered in the blaxploitation period was Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song (Gross, Van Peebles & Van Peebles, 1971), written, directed, produced, and starred in by Melvin Van Peebles. The story centers on Sweet, an amoral and hedonistic hustler and pimp, who kills two white cops who were attacking a young black radical. He spends the rest of the movie on the lam, running from racist cops and to pimps, gangsters, bikers, and whores. Sweet's "revolutionary consciousness" is heightened because of his firsthand experience with police corruption, and by the movie's end he has become a heroic, almost mythical, black revolutionary. The film ended with the message: "A BAADASSSSS NIGGER IS COMING BACK TO COLLECT SOME DUES" (Pilgrim, 2012).

"With the glamorization of the ghetto, however, came also the elevation of the Pimp/outlaw/rebel as folk hero. Van Peebles played up this new sensibility, and his film was the first to glorify the pimp. It failed, however, to explain the social conditions that made the pimp such an important figure. At the same time, the movie debased the black woman, depicting her as little more than a whore" (ibid.)

While getting Black people into these powerful artistic spaces was certainly a step in the right direction, the representations remained pretty one sided and in line with longstanding stereotypes such as "Jezebel." (Loft, 2020)

The modern depictions of the Jezebel deals with an independent and emancipated woman, who is entirely in control of her own sexuality. After her oppression and wrongful depiction for centuries, she became an individual that makes her own rules, at times seen as impulsive, but nevertheless provides a great example for future generations of independent women.

Some negative renditions of the Jezebel stereotype. The new versions of the Jezebel include; the Gold Digger who trades sexual favours for economic gain; the Freak, a sexually aggressive woman that has no emotional attachment when it comes to sex; the Gangster Bitch who uses sex to prove her loyalty; the Baby Mama who uses her pregnancy to form a relationship with the father (Stephens & Phillips, 2003), and the Hoochie, a woman who uses her sexually deviant personality to attract men just for the pleasure. (Collins,2000).

America continues to make considerable progress for social justice, racial equity, and fair representation. However, harmful stereotypes of Black women have been deeply ingrained in our society for centuries and continue to lurk underneath the surface. While they may have taken on modern and less obvious iterations, they are still well and alive. They continue to be found in current media, advertisement, and pop culture (Loft, 2020).

Conclusion

It takes just couple seconds to find the instance of hyper sexualization of African American women within a music industry. Especially after the Rap music became the sound of the mainstream, the media became saturated with the corresponding images. The music videos and performances are full of scantily clad, nubile African American women dancing to lyrics that are simply derogatory and vulgar. There is a belief that some African American women rappers reflect some of the attributes of the jezebel due to the promiscuity in their music. Are black women in rap

facilitating the jezebel stereotype and, in turn, adversely affecting the depiction of black women in general? Are they unapologetic about their sexuality and simply enjoying life? At the same time, women in rap have also always put forth some positive sentiment in their music, (MC's like Queen Latifah, Lauryn Hill, and MC Lyte).

As time goes by, stereotypes change or even lose meaning, but it is heartbreaking indeed, that a half century after the American civil rights movement, it is increasingly easy to find black women, especially young ones, depicted as Jezebels whose only value is as sexual commodities (Pilgrim, 2012).

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