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Defining The "Strong Black Woman"

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Abstract

The African American woman has and still is the most marginalized woman in America’s history, yet has the most unattainable set of standards to uphold. In an effort to examine a stereotype for this observation essay, I wanted to analyze the Strong Black Woman stereotype, which is a social construct, comprised of three archetypes: Mammy, the Jezebel, and Sapphire. These archetypes are examined through an observation of four television networks, as well as, by interviewing twenty participants. The data from this brief study reveals that this stereotype paints a more complex picture of the African American woman, when addressing whether today’s women ascribe to this narrative.

Keywords: strong black woman, mammy, jezebel, sapphire, stereotype
Defining The “Strong Black Woman”

America birthed the Strong Black Woman; she is a figment of our Founding Father’s imagination. The antebellum South constructed a fantastical image of Black femininity that characterized her as: hard-working, moral, long-suffering, resilient, loyal, sassy, sexy, and self-reliant. This stereotype has created a perplexed and unattainable standard of what it means to be ‘Black’ and what it means to be a ‘woman’. And, while this narrative has elicited positive and powerful images of Black womanhood, it, too, has confined African American women to the margins of perfection.

“Stories of Black women’s limitless capacity to nurture others, their willingness to sacrifice for family, their unswerving loyalty, and boundless Earth Mother sexuality proliferate within historical and contemporary cultural lore. And, while inspiring respect and admiration, the Strong Black Woman is ultimately denied the ability to fail, to suffer, to fall from grace – for to demonstrate the human frailty afforded to others is to relinquish her power and become her antithesis: the Victim” (Mataka).

Archetyped as Mammy, the Jezebel, or Sapphire, the Strong Black Woman stereotype leaves no room for versatility or individuality in the expression of Black womanhood. My personal interviews and observations confirm this reality and show that despite possessing complexity and distinctiveness, for every African American woman, there is always the pressure to ascribe to this unreachable narrative. Thus, in descriptions of the Black woman, an overwhelming majority sees her as the very depiction of this stereotype.
Abound in the media and my interviews of 10 African American women, along with 10 participants from diverse backgrounds; it seems every African American woman has a nurturing bone in her body. She is the backbone of her family. Every family has a female figure that embodies Mammy. She was written fictitiously into American History as the slave master’s favorite “happy-go-lucky” caretaker. Depicted as a jolly, big-bosomed, sexless woman, Mammy made slavery seem more humane and suggested the fact that there that could actually be a such thing as a happy and appreciative slave (University at Albany). Think of Aunt Jemima’s pancakes or Octavia Spencer’s Oscar-wining performance of Minny Jackson in The Help. Mammy personifies the ideal qualities of a strong African American woman – one that has wisdom and has appreciation for everything. These aren’t qualities to disown. But, in an attempt to exist as an individual, those women who don’t want to have children and have the audacity to question the unjust fall, short of the glory of Mammy. For example, while watching ABC as a part of my observation, even the strongest women – from Scandal’s Olivia Pope to How to Get Away with Murder’s Annalise Keating – have the essence of a nurturer. This expression of Mammy is subtle, yet in order to counter the domineering strength of two limitless lawyers, they have to possess a sort of softness.

In one particularly heavy scene from How To Get Away With Murder, Keating who typically purports an unremitting toughness, embraces her law intern, Wes, that is suffering the loss of his neighbor whom he’d befriended and fell in love with. On the wooden staircase of Keating’s home, her embrace of Wes is long, a small stream of tears are shed from one eye, and her words of wisdom are soothing. Just as a mother would calm her child, Keating, while not displaying hyper-jolliness and unreasonable appreciation like Mammy, initiates her ‘mother-instincts’. Furthermore, she fulfills the Mammy archetype, as she takes care of her fragile
student, in his time of need. Taken from my observations, in its entirety, media representations of Mammy, for the most part, were far and few in-between. This could possibly be due to the social backlash of Mammy, and Black society’s quest to bring death to this oftentimes demeaning personification.

My interview process allowed for the participants to answer an open-ended question: “What is your view of the Black woman?” The African American women interviewed were asked a slightly different question: “Do you ascribe to the Strong Black Woman stereotype?” I took down the specific adjectives used to describe African American women and determined whether they aligned with the characteristics depicted in the stereotype. In analyzing the Mammy, personal interviews more so spoke to the ideal of being a Mother and “spreading love”, as one interviewee put it. Another interviewee mentioned that the first thing that came to mind when thinking of African American women is “being a single mother”. Thus, while the nurturing aspect of femininity is an appreciated component of the Mammy archetype, when considering African American women, specifically, my interview reveals that with the nurturer role comes a burdensome responsibility to provide for her family alone.

Unlike Black society’s rejection of Mammy, the depiction of the Jezebel is one archetype that a social uproar will not cause a cease in existence. Her audacious sexuality and promiscuity runs rampant in television advertisements. Furthermore, my interview descriptions detail the African American woman as possessing a “captivating beauty”. But, the Jezebel historically represents a false sense of sexual liberation. Her characterization is a means to justify systemic sexual violence against African American women that is rarely acknowledged (Ferris State University, Jezebel). Statistics show that African American women are 10% more likely to be victimized than their White American counterparts; yet 61% of sexual violence goes unreported
(Sharply-Whiting, 57). A Black woman’s inability to give consent is seen in the many sexual assaults of the slave master, and has perpetuated a notion that African American women – with their sensuous curves and Siren-like sex appeal – are too sexual to give consent (Sharply-Whiting, 67). They are always stereotyped as sexually available.

Television and other media outlets objectify all women, regardless of color. But, what is interesting is that objectification of an African American woman is rooted in her being an “Earth Mother”, and it being her duty to give life to America, as she has done for centuries (Frank). Her supposed hyper-sexuality and promiscuity is merely a fantastical scapegoat for men – White and Black – to have her for his pleasure, at all times. With this idea exists a certain loyalty that is hard to unravel, and this is seen in the unwavering love that African American women have for their men. Take BET’s Being Mary Jane, the lead character’s sexual escapades are masked by this desire to have love – and when she finds it in a White man – it is somehow unfulfilling. Mary Jane expresses the desire for “Black Love”, even at the expense of her sexual well-being, which is seen in her careless rendezvous with an endless list of men.

One moment in the television series that spoke volumes to this hypersexual complex occurs during one of Mary Jane’s many escapades. She meets a British Black man in the midst of a chaotic and music-blasting nightclub, upon her first night in her new home of New York City. Despite the busyness and noisiness, they manage to make a deep connection driven by lust. Mary Jane in that moment is not hesitant or “playing hard to get”, rather she handles this approach with indifference and frankness. She rushes the conversation along, in order to jump right to her objective, which was, “to get the freak out of my system, before my husband comes”. She’s made a pledge to stop “auditioning boys for her bed” in order to find her husband. The most intriguing moment comes as the couple has arrived to Mary Jane’s hotel, and her new partner
realizes a strange look in her brown eyes. He instructs her to tell him what she wants, referring to sexual favors, and she responds, “Tell me you love me.” This is an interesting counter to the Jezebel archetype that simultaneously complements it. Mary Jane’s male counterpart objectifies her based on her sex appeal, which is illustrated in her silhouette-shaping black dress and red calf-extenuating stilettos. Yet, this Jezebel persona that Mary Jane epitomizes is actually a means to an end that attracts him on a deeper level. This complex example is an exception, rather than a standard for African American women displayed on BET, whom are typically portrayed with far fewer complexities and nuances.

Many commercials on this channel displayed African American women dressed in revealing or form-fitting clothing to sell hair products, for example. Sex appeal, along with a diversity of hair textures and skin-tones, showcased a progression in ethnic diversity that divested from a Eurocentric ideal of beauty, but reminded the audience of the age-old idea that “sex sells”.

Interview descriptions, in a way, meshed these two Jezebel performances together and painted the Black woman as “undervalued”, “exposed” and “self-sacrificing”. The descriptions speak to Mary Jane’s sacrificing of her body and the commercial models’ physical exposure for the purpose of selling a product. The interviewee descriptions provided richness to the discussion, making the stereotype less ‘black or white’. Rather than determining whether the interviewees ascribed to the Jezebel narrative, it became more important to decipher what attributes seemed more acceptable or befitting than others.

Sapphire, however, is the most contested among interviewees and the most masked in the media. Sapphire recreates the angry Black woman imagery – an African American woman who is loud, rude, malicious, and overbearing. She is “tart-tongued and emasculating, one hand on a
hip and the other pointing and jabbing, violently and rhythmically rocking her head” (Ferris State University, Sapphire). But, more than that, assigning this caricature serves as control mechanism to punish African American women who violate the societal norms that encourage passivity, submission, and invisibility (Mataka). Her anger is typically directed toward African American men to critique them for their failures and disloyal allegiances with other women not of African descent. Sapphire is at the root of every bottled-up, blood boiling jousting argument that is seen on television, yet TV shows such as, FOX’s Empire, buffer these intense argumentative scenes with a crying spell or a heartfelt story that provides context to her anger. Empire’s “Cookie” often fuels fiery quarrels with her ex-husband Luscious Lyon or her three sons, but the audience isn’t taken aback by her anger, but rather sympathizes with her, considering the unwavering passion and protection she has for family after being incarcerated for 17 years.

An episode that was premiering inspired my analysis of Cookie and her eccentric character. She is loud, in every sense of the word. On this particular showing, her clothing screamed dominance and fearlessness, with roaring leopard prints on her mesh top and matching jacket, and gold stones in her hat resembling a crown. Her attitude was on par with her outfit, as she engaged in a heated argument with her ex-husband that turned into literal destruction. Luscious had hit a nerve that sent Cookie spiraling out-of-control, destroying elegant glass tables, crystal light fixtures, and even a baby grand piano. Cookie’s character is an explicit embodiment of Sapphire, but her explosion is seemingly justified, as the scene ends with her in tears. Given the context of the scene, we see that she has unresolved feelings for Luscious that viscously haunt her. The balance in the scene is an example of Sapphire’s archetype being exploited for entertainment, but also being contested, so as to not ‘wholeheartedly’ feed into this negative stereotype.
Interviewees demonstrated no tolerance for Sapphire, as she is embodied by Cookie, and wanted this archetype to die along with Mammy. But, upon reviewing the adjectives used to describe an African American woman, words like “assertive”, “determined”, “not afraid”, and “go-getter”, actually seem to demonstrate an appreciation for the manner in which Sapphire rejects patriarchy and provides dimension to African American women. Sapphire’s expression of emotion besides sorrow and dominance in her craft is often misinterpreted as indignation and bossiness. Yet, Sapphire is reflective of the feminists that have helped pave the way for African American women to be independent “girl-bosses”.

Encompassing all forms of Black female strength, these three caricatures of African American women each miss the margin in their ability to explain her complexity and personhood. Given the atrocities that African American women have suffered, they are still the most marginalized and oppressed persons in American society. These stereotypes were created by a White patriarchal system that saturates media and propaganda with destructive images of minority populations. But, more than anything, these archetypes confine African American women to live up to a standard of strength, loyalty, sexiness, independence and nurturing, while also treading a fine line to reject notions of rudeness, dominance, dependency, and negligence. While media representations from the outlets I observed and the interviews confirmed the existence of the Strong Black Woman stereotypes, it provided context to the many interpretations of Black womanhood. These observations unveiled that despite wanting to hold on to the positive images that ascribe to the Strong Black Woman narrative, there is a desire to be versatile and see humanized versions of African American women in the media.
Works Cited


Mataka, Laini. "Beyond Mammy, Jezebel, & Sapphire: Reclaiming Images of Black Women."


