The Cultural Significance of Stereotypes of Black Women on Television

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Picture a Black woman in your mind. She has a powerful body. She is engaged in hard work. Yet, to society, she is a considerable threat. Her pride, which is very effective in her everyday life, is seen as arrogance. Although many Black women are among the most influential people on earth, our society often depicts their strength as a threat. Americans often believe black women are negative examples of how the general public believes a woman should behave.

This is due partly to years of negative stereotypes being shown through the media. Scholar Patricia Hill Collins provides a critical observation about the media's responsibility for these stereotypes when she writes that "'portraying African-American women as stereotypical mammies, matriarchs, welfare recipients, and hot mammas helps justify U.S. Black women's oppression," (as cited in Cheers 2018, pg. 3). In order to address the problem of how black women are portrayed in the media, both the creators of television programs and black women in the wider culture should be more aware of the representation of black women, and willing to challenge the stereotypes that already exist to change them in the future.

This paper looks into the history of some significant stereotypes of Black women as they developed since the 1800s. It then dives into the history of Black women's portrayals on television. Then, it examines how these portrayals have fed into stereotypes of Black womanhood. Following this, it explores ways to disrupt or alter the negative associations around Black womanhood, especially the cultural image of the "Angry Black Woman." Finally, it suggests ways of thinking and consuming television that will help decrease stereotypes around Black women and Blackness in general.

Section I

The Mammy

The mammy came to be well-known around the Jim Crow era. The mammy is known for being derived from the "house slave". She is selfless and servile and white people use her for work. She is an older black woman who is not sexualized. The mammy is not thought of as being overly sexual. Since Mammy is an older woman, she does not have a type of romantic style for people. The mammy is someone who is used for serving others.

The name Mammy is from Hattie McDaniel's character from *Gone With the Wind*, who provided many of the most prominent characteristics of the stereotype. Another well-known example of a mammy is "Aunt Jemima." She is portrayed as a mammy that is used for making pancakes. The Quaker Oats company used her as a brand name from the year 1889 to 2021. After the beginning of racial protests in 2020, "Quaker, a subsidiary of PepsiCo, said removing the image and name is part of an effort by the company 'to make progress toward racial equality'" (Kesslen 2020). In an early 2000's show *The Proud Family,* the character Suga Mama shows a more contemporary version of the mammy. She is very sassy towards others, especially her son Oscar Proud. However, she is not a servant to a white family, an important difference between her and the older stereotype.

The Jezebel

According to Carolyn M. West, the long history of Black women being sexually assaulted and abused by white men contributed to the development of "the Jezebel

stereotype, which branded Black women as sexually promiscuous and immoral, [and] was used to rationalize these sexual atrocities," (West 2008). The Jezebel stereotype highlights the sexual nature of Black women in order to give justification to people who wanted to use these women, who under slavery were forced to consent to sex from a white person, for their own sexual intentions. White slaveholders were completely in charge of Black bodies, yet they felt the need to portray Black women as choosing to have sexual relationships. These white men wanted to sexualize Black women in order to change her image: from slave or servant to a willing participant in sex.

Even though Jezebel is an old term, it still relates to today's world: as West states, "referred to as 'hoochies,' 'freaks,' 'hoodrats,' or 'chickenheads,' contemporary Jezebels can be found jiggling and gyrating in hip-hop music videos. Their scantily clad bodies are often draped over expensive cars or fondled by male rappers," (West 2008). Men today seek to portray Black women as begging for sex, or even as only sexual objects, just like men from the 19th century did. This shows how black women have continued to be thought of for their sexual nature, and often nothing else.

The Sapphire

The Sapphire is a stereotype that got its name from the radio and television program *Amos n' Andy*, but it existed for many decades in the past before that show. According to Pilgrim, the Sapphire is "the characterization of African American women as domineering, aggressive, and emasculating shrews," (Pilgrim 2012). Yet, originally this figure was a way of letting people see how the black woman had a positive ability to get around racism. These versions of the stereotype "were allowed to pretend-chastise

whites, including men," (Pilgrim 2012). This was a time when white men were the leaders of society. Their opinion mattered more than anyone else in society.

"The Angry Black Woman" is a stereotype that revolves around the black woman. This stereotype has been used to describe a black woman's hostility, aggressiveness, and temper. Society thinks the personality of Black women is fierce. An example from an older show, *Sanford and Son,* where LaWanda Page play a character called Aunt Ester. Aunt Ester is a rude, loud, malicious, and stubborn character. She shows her stubbornness toward another character named Fred, which Redd Foxx plays.

Section 2

Scholars have shown the role that television has in continuing stereotypes like the mammy, sapphire, and jezebel, and the ways that it contributes to the oppression of women, especially black women. This examines the history of black women in television. As television progressed through the decades, it also showed a wide variety of the economic, social, and cultural environments of Black women in America through their representation in television. In order to address the problem of how black women are portrayed in the media, both the creators of television programs and black women in the wider culture should be more aware of the representation of black women.

Most of these shows explain the point of view of black women in the television industry. Black women in these shows are described as fierce, reliable, and hardworking people who are loyal to their loved ones. In her book, In "The Evolution of Black Women

in Television," Imani Cheers defines a common stereotype that was portrayed during this time called the mainstream matriarch. It is described as, "female characters played by black women who rule a family or group" (Cheers 2018). It is typical in these shows that the mother is always doing some type of house labor and taking on the traditional role of caretaker.

Several landmark television shows featured black people aired beginning from the early days of television from the 1950s to the 2000s. The shows were *Amos n' Andy*, *Billy Daniel's Show*, and *The Nat King Cole* Show from the 1950s; *Julia* and *I Spy* from the 1960s; *Sanford and Son, Good Times,* and *The Jeffersons* in the 1970s; *The Cosby Show*, *Amen*, and *Family Matters* in the 1980; *Fresh Prince of Bel Air, Martin*, and the Wayans Bros in the 1990s; and finally, *My Wife and Kids, Tyler Perry's House of Payne, Everybody Hates Chris,* and *The Proud Family* in the 2000's.

The 1950s to the 2000s have similarities and differences with the stereotypes that are portrayed on television with Mammy, Sapphire, and Jezebel. In the 1950s show *Amos n' Andy,* the sapphire stereotype is represented by Sapphire Stevens. The stereotype's name "Sapphire" came from the character Sapphire Stevens. On the show, Sapphire Stevens often got into verbal arguments with her husband over his life choices. This developed the stereotype of a strong, aggressive, and angry black woman. Sapphire Stevens' anger towards her husband eventually developed into a black woman expressing every emotion with anger, creating the stereotype of the Sapphire that is known today.

In the 1950s, the show *Julia* began to show a new perspective of Black women on TV. Diahann Carroll, who played the main character Julia*,* was the first Black woman

in a lead role on TV (Cheers). On the show, Julia is portrayed as a mainstream

matriarch. She is a widow who works as a nurse, and is a single mother to her son,

Corey. Julia is not as aggressive as the Sapphire stereotype that has been previously

shown in the 1950s. She shows much more kindness and takes on a more motherly

role in this series. This was also the first time a Black person was portrayed in a

professional role on TV (Cheers). This showed the public that Black people, especially

women, were capable of getting professional jobs and doing well in those positions. The

show *Julia,* helped people understand that the attitudes that they have seen from Black

women on TV were not a true representation of all Black women.

After the show *Julia* aired, Black actors and actresses started to desire roles

where they were portrayed as more than a typical stereotype. In the 1970s show *Good

Times* Florida Evans, played by Ester Rolle, is known for showing the stereotype of a

mammy, where she did the laundry, made dinner, and did other household

responsibilities. The character J.J. Evans, Florida Evans' son, was an outgoing, joyful,

and goofy person. As the show progressed, he began to be portrayed more as a bad

role model being uneducated, unemployed, and lazy. The actor John Amos, who played

Florida Evans' husband James Evans, and Ester Rolle both decided to leave the show

because J.J. 's actions were immature and did not show Black people in a good light.

Ester eventually came back to the show because she was promised J.J. 's character

role would change. When Ester left the show ratings started to decrease. Her popularity

on the show gave people more interest in watching. She was only brought back to the

show to help the show's ratings increase. However, it was too late and the show ended shortly after.

Section 3

Later in the 2000s and in today's world, there have been changes to the stereotypes of black women in television. Black women are now more outspoken about how they've been treated and portrayed for many decades in the television industry. Black women are looking for more roles that feature intelligent, strong, and genuine women. Actress Cicely Tyson, one of the first Black actresses to star in a mainstream TV drama in the early 60s, put it best when she said, "We Black actresses have played so many prostitutes and drug addicts and housemaids, always negative. I won't play that kind of characterless role anymore, even if I have to go back to starving," (Martin). Black actresses are serious about how they are being treated and are now fighting for the roles they deserve.

One contemporary example of how Black creators are more aware of the wider impact of their work on society unlike a lot of shows in the past can be found in the tv Black-ish. In season 5, the episode "Black Like Us," based on Diane, played by the actress Marsai Martin, describes the struggles of colorism. Diane believed the Johnson family, who are the show's main characters, treated her differently because she was a dark-skinned black girl. As Diane points out, this prejudice is similar to society's, where "the only time [she] sees a darkskin person on TV is when the news says the police have murdered another one of us!" (Barris, 2019). This shows how Black characters in

modern television shows are more self-aware of stereotypes, and that they are more willing to call them out.

Tracee Ellis Ross, one of the stars of *Black-ish*, states plainly why this is so important: "Supporting ownership of our own narratives and the expansion of our equity both on an individual and personal level in how you invest in yourself and have your own power in your own life and inhabit your own skin with freedom and joy, whatever that means for you," (Sanders 2020).

Black women want to see more complex portrayals of themselves on the television screen. How black women are seen in the television industry is different than how they see themselves. Right now, Black women have a poor variety of representation. A survey conducted by the Oprah Winfrey Network and National Research Group showed, "of survey respondents, 95% said they want to see more stories about Black joy, rather than Black pain and struggle, with healthy romantic love the top theme those responding wanted to see, at 58%" (Tapp 2021). The overwhelming majority want to see themselves on television in a different, more diverse light. Media can make people feel different about themselves, making them feel more confident and proud (Tapp 2021). This is important to represent black women in a variety of ways so they can feel uplifted and hopeful for the future.

Conclusion

  Black women have had their own representation on television for many decades. The television industry uses negative stereotypes to portray black women, which makes black women as a whole look differently in the industry than in real life. The mammy, sapphire, and jezebel are three different stereotypical roles black women played on television, which show different characteristics. Society pictures black women as loud, ignorant, rude, and angry based on these stereotypes. Darker women tend to struggle more than lighter women in the industry. The television industry sees light skin women as less aggressive.

  In today's world, black women are very aware of past portrayals and open up more about how they've been treated for many years. Back then, they were more afraid of what would happen to them if they spoke the truth. If black women spoke the truth they would've been blacklisted or lost their jobs. On television shows, there has been more racial diversity in the cast; however, most of the cast members played stereotypes. Black women want to play roles that help uplift each other instead of putting each other down. They are now fighting for roles that represent who they are in society today rather than giving in to the negative stereotypes they have been playing for so long.

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