

## The Dehumanization of Black Women

Picadilly Circus, November 10, 1810. Sarah Baartman, an African domestic servant, makes her debut as the “Hottentot Venus” in England. As she was toured around Europe, Baartman was humiliated and violated, her hips being a source of income for those that exploited her. She was forced to dance, sing, and stand while people poked, prodded, and gawked at her. To her captors and the public, she was nothing but an exhibit and a freak of nature because of her body and skin. Similar narratives of black women were easy to come across since slavery was established, extreme objectification and dehumanization were nothing uncommon. Baartman and others were treated as if they were less than others, suffering through the torture their owners put them through. Though slavery was abolished, African-American women must deal with the effects it continues to have on them and the entire black community. Even when their bodies are abused and negative stereotypes are made about them, black women are expected to persevere through their gradual dehumanization and mistreatment while they deal with the aftermath of the historical discrimination against them.

From the beginning of the slave trade, black women went through traumatic displays of disrespect by white owners and traders. As they crossed over the Middle Passage, African women were forced to dance nude on the decks of ships, inhumanely marked on their bodies, and purposefully exposed as they were flogged for punishment. Treatment got much worse when slaves arrived on the shores of America, African slaves have countless narratives of themselves and their peers being brutalized and sexually abused by their owners. Modern-day society has kept this attitude towards black women, objectifying and brutalizing them at a disproportionate rate. Around 40% of all black women are victims of domestic violence, compared to the 31.5% average of all women, they are also 2.5 times more likely to be murdered by men than white women (Blackburncenter.org). We can also see this in situations like the murder of EMT

Breonna Taylor or the shooting involving rapper Megan Thee Stallion, both are cases of black women who were attacked and ignored when justice was supposed to be served. The cause of these situations cannot only be drawn back to slavery and racist attitudes that existed past it but also the idea that femininity does not equate to blackness, in fact, blackness is hardly equated to humanity at all. The Implicit Association Test compares two photos and asks subjects whether or not those photos are correlated. Of 251 white Americans, researchers found that “Black women were more strongly implicitly associated with animal and object concepts,” implying that black females are immediately and unconsciously perceived as “less than.” This has an impact on how black women are treated in day-to-day life, leading to fewer opportunities in school and work settings and an increased chance of being in high-risk situations.

The unfair physical treatment of black women can be traced back to the preconceived notions developed about them during slavery. But what exactly are those notions? To list a few: The Mammy, Jezebel, and angry black woman. Each of these stereotypes about African-American women dates back to before chattel slavery was popularized and used as excuses for the treatment female slaves received. The very first stereotype delegated to black women can be labeled as the Jezebel, a highly sexual being that has the malicious intent of sexually ruining every man she comes across. This was a purposeful misconception about countless young women, a weak excuse to beat, rape, and abuse them over numerous years. Female slaves were “both the object of the white man’s abhorrence and desire” (thirteen.org), the scapegoats of many white men’s immorality, and an easy way to get free slaves. Historically, white men found a way to monopolize rape itself, reproducing with slaves and putting their own children in captivity. As time went on, more stereotypes formed around the characteristics of black women from the white perspective. The “welfare queen” depicts a black woman who exploits the governmental

assistance given to her, disregarding the actual financial hardships black women across the country may face. The “tragic mulatta” is a lighter-skinned black woman who yearns for white approval, her biggest challenge being facing her own blackness. The “mammy,” a historically famous caricature, making appearances in many movies, shows, and syrup bottles, is a black woman who essentially has no needs and focuses on aiding others. In recent years, these caricatures and stereotypes became a large number of representations of African-American women in media. For many, these are the first impressions of black women as a whole and, consequently, the molds they may fit other black women into as they go through life. Through these, black women are simplified into bite-sized pieces for those who refuse to accept that they are normally functioning people. These caricatures, established in slavery, make it difficult for black women to show a full emotional spectrum, receive the benefits necessary to accommodate the cost of living, or even aim high without being simplified into another false narrative.

Black women are subject to various methods of mistreatment, but their dehumanization has been profited off of and not taken seriously. This has made it significantly harder for black women to establish themselves in a society that, historically, has never failed to brutalize and simplify them. Though we have made much progress through increased education with the use of media (For example, Sarah Baartman was mentioned in a Beyonce lyric and now has a statue dedicated to her), we should always consider stories like Sarah Baartman, Breonna Taylor, and others to remind ourselves that black women have struggled too and have the right to be treated and viewed as humans.

## Sources

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