

# The Jezebel Stereotype

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**THE JEZEBEL STEREOTYPE**

*Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the M.A. in English Language  
and Literature and Pedagogy at the University of Rijeka*

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## ABSTRACT

In this M.A. thesis I will explore the development and meaning of the Jezebel stereotype, formed in order to control and exploit African American women. The reason I chose this topic was because the effects of it can still be seen today and are still present in everyday lives of African American women. The stereotype itself originated in slavery, over 300 years ago, and it is fascinating that the controlling images that were found then are still present today. The Jezebel stereotype portrays African American women as hypersexual beings, marking them for a life of abuse and exploitation for which they themselves are seen as the cause of. In today's world, mass media makes it easier to convey these damaging images to a large number of people, seeing as television series, the Internet, and music are such vital parts of our lives. Like every stereotype, the Jezebel one also carries with it many negative consequences, including substance abuse, depression, promiscuity and prostitution, medical and other psychological issues. The goal of this thesis is to provide a general overview of the historical reasons behind the development of this stereotype and to see how the media portrayals of African American women affect them and their decision making processes.

# Table of contents

<b>1. Historical accounts of African American women</b> .....	3
<b>2. Stereotypes of African American women</b> .....	8
2.1. The Mammy .....	8
2.2. The Sapphire .....	9
2.3. The Welfare queen/mother .....	9
2.4. The Strong black woman .....	10
<b>3. The Jezebel stereotype</b> .....	11
3.1. Historical accounts .....	11
3.2. Who is the Jezebel? .....	14
3.3. Representations of the Jezebel .....	17
<b>4. The Jezebel in the media</b> .....	20
4.1. The Jezebel in music .....	22
4.2. Literature .....	24
4.3. Films and television shows .....	26
<b>5. Effects of sexual stereotypes</b> .....	31
5.1. Sexual decision making .....	32
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	37
<b>Literature</b> .....	39

## Introduction

Throughout history, African American women have had a particularly difficult journey which consisted of innumerable hardships and extremely unlawful mistreatment. From slavery, perhaps even before that, and up until now their situation has changed, but it still offers room for improvement. Slave women have largely been treated and represented as property, or objects, given to the highest bidder at an auction and used as their new master and owner saw fit. They were beaten, raped, separated from their families, and used in any way imaginable. The women that came after slavery were treated slightly better - they had families and paid jobs – but were still employed by people who saw them as unworthy of their rights, privileges, or even their time. They were mostly housemaids or nannies to wealthy families. The African American women of today are stronger and know their worth, but they are still encountered by obstacles such as lower pay or discrimination. All those women have something in common, they were all mistreated and wrongly represented in society. They were judged by their behavior, by their looks or even by the way they spoke. They were categorized by stereotypical characteristics that were conceived by the society around them - mostly White society - who did not understand or even care to understand, the African American culture and the differences between them. Some of the most common older stereotypes used to categorize African American women are the *Mammy*, *The Sapphire*, and the *Jezebel*. The old ones developed into new stereotypes that are used today, such as the *Strong black woman*, the *Angry black woman*, the *Hoochie*, the *Gold Digger*, or the *Video vixen*, to name a few. Many of these new stereotypical images were created as the world of technology and the mass media developed. The availability of television shows, videos on the Internet, music, and even literary works made it much easier for

these images to spread to a wider public. Consequently, this also meant that African American women were subjected to them more frequently and, in turn, were not able to forget about the mistreatment that usually followed them. This kind of stereotypical categorization as immoral or uneducated has many negative effects that are still present in the lives of African American women. The sexual abuse present in slavery can still be found today, leaving many psychological and traumatizing consequences such as substance abuse or depression.

## **1. Historical accounts of African American women**

The historical oppression of African American women began when the first ships were brought from Africa to Virginia, in 1619. The women on board those ships were meant for slavery and exploitation, to work the fields and fulfill the desires of their masters. Since then, their oppression can be viewed through three dimensions (Collins, 2000). Firstly, the economic dimension that is signified by the exploitation of African American women's labor. African American women were forced into hard manual labor which was not paid adequately, and they were often so overworked they had no interest or time to get educated. Secondly, the political dimension of oppression that was executed by denying African American women their rights. They were not allowed to vote or work in public offices and were not given the same legal protection as White women and men. This political dimension spread into the educational domain as well. Many institutions forbade the admittance of African American women into their programs, forcing them to attend schools with low funding. The last dimension are the controlling images that were formed during the slavery period and that are still present in some form today. When it comes to African American women, these controlling images are mostly negative – uncivilized, hypersexual, deviant or uneducated to name a few.

Furthermore, Collins (2000) states that the ideas behind slavery were vital in the forming of American capitalistic society because they provided the means for the racial, political and economic oppression of African Americans. African Americans were treated as animals and presented as less than humans - they were owned, sold and traded as property which made them susceptible to exploitation. African American women and their sexuality and reproductive ability made sexual slavery and sexual exploitation

possible. During the slavery period, African American women were often raped by their owners, which served as a form of control and a means to exert dominance of the White male. The landlords and the White elite society presented African American women as sexually deviant and loose, which enabled the owners to continue sexually exploiting their slaves. The White women of the slavery era were often portrayed as fragile, virginal, and committed to their family (Morton, 1991). This heavily contrasted with the prominent image of the unrestrained, highly sexual African American woman, which meant that the White owners were free to sexually exploit them without it being seen as a violation (Collins, 2000). For African American women who were enslaved, the conditions of their work, their family relations and motherhood were changed by the process of enslavement. Their work was free and it benefited only their owners, and they also had no control over the amount of work they did or who they worked with.

Having no control over their work, their familiar life suffered, mostly in terms of motherhood and caring for their children. According to Collins (2000:50), one reason for their changed perceptions of motherhood could be the fact that the White elite society wanted to tie African American women's "sexuality and fertility to their system of capitalistic exploitation". This enabled the Whites to maintain their status of the "better" race. Collins (2000) goes on to explain that the racial subordination was based on the notion that Black and White races need to be kept pure, meaning that the children born to African American mothers who were fathered by White men were still slaves. Furthermore, overworking slave mothers and not giving them time to be with their children meant that they had difficulties in passing their knowledge and values on to their children, which in turn meant there was a lesser chance of resisting the current slave master/slave order. Additionally, the slavery system that controlled slave women's reproduction was beneficial for economic gain. The slave owners were able



to use their positions to grow the number of slaves by giving slave women different benefits, ranging from less work or more rations.

Even though slavery was abolished in 1865, racial oppression was still present in the years that followed it. Slavery was replaced by severe racial segregation that was accompanied by laws and customs in which African Americans had separate public and private places. Collins (2000) states that during the Jim Crow Era, African American and White people had separate housing and neighborhood spaces, divided schools, restaurants, theaters, and other public institutions. According to Collins (2000), African American women in this period had two possible job positions to hold: that of the field worker, but now for pay, or of a domestic worker. Field workers had no control over their wages as all the money they earned went to the male leader of the household. Domestic workers, on the other hand, earned low wages and were once again in danger of sexual abuse from their employers. The Jim Crow Era also brought elements of slavery that were fueled by perceptions of African American hypersexuality (Collins, 2005). African American women were still seen as deviant and this, in the eyes of White people, meant that rape could not be seen as an act of abuse. As Collins (2005:63-64) puts it:

*“These beliefs in a deviant Black sexuality in turn sparked gender-specific controlling images of African American men as potential rapists who deserved to be lynched, and African American women as so morally loose that they were impossible to rape.”*

Moreover, because African American women were no longer under the control of White men, they also had no protection from sexual harassment. During slavery, African American women were seen as the private property of a single white man and

his family, whereas in the Jim Crow Era they were no one's property and, therefore, available to all White men.

Collins (2000) states that during the 1900s, many African American women moved from the rural to the urban areas where they were able to find better jobs and housing. She further explains that in these urban areas, they could find day jobs, meaning that at the end of the day they had the ability to go home to their families. With this shift to day work, their wages improved slightly, although they were still exploited and underpaid. They were often required to wear uniforms so the employers can know which field of domestic work they do, and they often had special parts of the city where employers came to offer them work. African American women were also able to find jobs in manufacturing, working in factories or mills (Collins, 2005). According to Collins (2005), even despite the changes in their lives for the better, they were still being treated as sexually immoral. However, they were successful in organizing many different movements and clubs that helped defy the controlling images and stereotypes of African American women as deviant and sexual. They started to portray themselves as rational, respectable and moral women by going to church, staying out of bars and dance halls, and trying to bend their personalities to fit the white standards of morality.

Collins (2005) gives account of the urbanization of the African American society that brought about many positive changes. It was because of this urban environment and the changes to their perception that many African American organizations, such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the National Association for Colored Women (NACW) or the Urban League were formed. The purpose of these organizations was to fight for African American's rights and to improve their position in society. African American women in this period still had no voting rights and had very little job opportunities aside from domestic

employment. After the Civil Rights Act in 1964 and the Voting Rights Act in 1965, with the legal ban on discrimination based on gender, race, religion, or nationality, job and housing opportunities for African American people improved. They were able to find employment in companies where they could eventually get promoted to a better position, they no longer worked for below-average salaries, and were able to afford education for their children, or even themselves. The Civil Right Act banned segregation in schools, meaning that African American women and men were getting the same level of education as White men and women, which further enabled them to be more competitive on job markets. They were now able to work as lawyers, doctors, teachers, or engineers, which are commonly regarded as very stable careers with average or above-average salaries. However, despite the legal protection they now had, many African American women were still given jobs with smaller salaries than African American men or White women (Collins, 2005). Furthermore, Collins (2005) states that during the 1980s and 1990s there was an increase in the number of African American men who were incarcerated for illegal activities, leaving their partners to care for the family. African American women during this period were responsible for their households, which was made difficult by the fact that men still earned more, when they were able to find work, meaning that many families were living in poverty.

In the contemporary African American society, many characteristics regarding working African American women still exist. Even though they were able to change their fields of work from domestic services to industrial and administrative ones, they were still underpaid and at risk of poverty. Many African American women are still living on a day-to-day basis, trying to earn enough money so they can provide for their children and themselves. This often leads them to work multiple jobs, spending little time at home, and again sacrificing their family life and motherhood.

## 2. Stereotypes of African American women

African American people, in general, are subjected to a numerous amount of racial and sexual stereotypes. The women have especially been subjected to controlling images and stereotypes that are used to define them. The *Mammy*, the *Sapphire*, the *Jezebel*, the *Welfare queen*, the *Video vixen*, and the *Angry black woman* are just a couple of them. These stereotypes emerged during history as ways of explaining the racial oppression and the sexual exploitation of the Blacks at the hand of the Whites.

### 2.1. The Mammy

According to Collins (2000), the image of the Black Mammy emerged during slavery. She was the first of the stereotypes to appear whose main purpose was to justify the exploitation of female slaves. The meaning of the Mammy was that she served as an explanation as to why Black women were used in the domestic service for so long.

The most common traits depicting the Mammy are dark complexion, kinky hair, overweight, selfless, and most importantly, obedient to the whims and needs of her master (Morton, 1991). The Mammy was a maternal figure for the White slave-owners children, whom she nursed and raised as if they were her own. She was the surrogate mistress of the house, seeing as she was the one doing all domestic chores. Morton (1991) also states that another trait depicting the Mammy, which during slavery was very important to White mistresses of the house, was that she had very little to no sex appeal. She was presented as a desexualized woman whose only purpose in life was to care for her master's children and his household. That purpose made the image of the Mammy an example of the perfect slave – she was aware that she had some power in the White household, but she also knew where she stood, she accepted her destiny as a subordinate. During the Jim Crow Era, the Mammy symbolized a ticket to the upper-

class (Morton, 1991). The households which had employed the Mammy to take care of their household and children were seen as successful, rich and important in society. Her image stood for a harmonious relationship between the Black and White races, a useful prop in trying to glamorize the Southern history.

## 2.2. The Sapphire

During slavery, where White women were characterized as passive, feminine, and frail, the opposite image of Black women was used to further racial discrimination. African American women were characterized as masculine workers or angry and aggressive women who were the reason their men and children fled. According to West (2008), given that the slave-owners often sold men and children, they had to take over the male role of the household, often angry at their master for selling their family away. Furthermore, West (2017) states that the image of the Sapphire was reinforced by the character of the same name in the TV and radio show called Amos and Andy. In the show, the character of Sapphire was the nagging wife of a lazy African American man.

The Sapphire stands for a loud, at times verbally abusive matriarchal figure. She is seen as a dominant figure in her household, kind of emasculating to her husband. The image of the Sapphire is that of a large woman of dark complexion whose primary role was to be the antithesis to the Mammy image (West, 1995). The Sapphire also represented an angry black woman, who was ill-tempered, mean and dictating to both her children and her husband.

## 2.3. The Welfare queen/mother

The Welfare queen is one of the newer stereotypes. It presents the black woman as a lazy, manipulative and scheming woman who has many children and spends her

days collecting government assistance (Tyree, 2011). The Welfare queen is seen as the reason for the poverty of African American families, therefore placing the blame for low wages and poor jobs on the victims themselves.

The Welfare mother, similarly to the queen, is a working-class black woman who has low wages, not earning enough to cover the expenses of her household which forces her to collect government benefits. She is labeled as a bad mother, but not in an aggressive way – she was in fact not aggressive enough. According to Patricia Hill Collins (2000), the image of the Welfare mother was used as a means to control black women's fertility. White elite society saw the Welfare mother as a threat to their political and economic stability.

#### 2.4. The Strong black woman

According to Versluys (2014), the stereotype of the Strong black woman is one of the few positive ones. The image was created by Black women themselves as a rebelling act against the other stereotypes usually describing them. This stereotype was used mostly by women who saw themselves as more than Mammies, Jezebels or Sapphires. They took the positive characteristics of the three images and put them all in one.

The Strong black woman is seen as the independent, strong, supportive, stop-at-nothing kind of woman. She is a woman who can take care of herself, and has no problem with working hard - both at home and at work. The problem with this particular stereotype is that the women who depict it are often seen as unfeminine, causing men to feel less masculine and ultimately leading to domestic abuse to feel manlier (Collins, 2005).

### 3. The Jezebel stereotype

#### 3.1. Historical accounts

The Jezebel stereotype is presumably the most common stereotype used to adorn African American women. According to Davis and Tucker-Brown (2013), it stems from the biblical figure found in the *Book of Kings*. The *Book of Kings* are two books of the Hebrew Bible or the Old Testaments that tell about the fate of the Israelites after King David dies. Gaines (2018)<sup>1</sup> gives a biblical account, stating that Jezebel was the wife of Ahab, King of Israel. She convinced the King to change faiths, from Yahweh to the deities' Baal and Asherah. Jezebel committed many sins against God and Israelites, such as blasphemy against a landowner that resulted in his death, and for those sins, she was punished. Jezebel was depicted in the Bible as a witch and a whore, who came to Israel with her religious beliefs and posed a great threat to the current religious system. She was shown as a lustful woman, and that image transcended into the modern image of the Jezebel stereotype we know today.

The portrayal of African American women as promiscuous Jezebels can also be the result of cultural and environmental differences between Africans and Anglo Saxons. English slave traders misunderstood polygamy as a sign of their insatiable sexual desires and their lack of coverage as eroticism.

According to Morton (1991), 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. Furthermore, she states that slave women usually worked in ragged clothes, often very revealing of their legs, chest, and arms.

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<sup>1</sup> Based on information found on: <https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/people-cultures-in-the-bible/people-in-the-bible/how-bad-was-jezebel/>

When put on auction, slave women were undressed in order to observe their physical condition, i.e. their ability to do hard work and bear new slaves. 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 (Morton, 1991).

A factor that contributed to the image of promiscuity of African American women were frequent pregnancies that occurred mostly as a consequence of rape and sexual abuse (Simms, 2001). As the Jezebel stereotype signified promiscuity, not even the judicial system provided protection from the institutionalized rape and sexual abuse of Black women. According to Simms (2001), rape was nonexistent in the face of the law when it concerned Black women. During the late nineteenth century, with the emancipation era, sexual abuse of Black women labeled as lascivious was seemingly less present. However, White men during that period were ignited by the feeling of diminished masculinity as Black women, who in their minds existed to fulfill their needs, were no longer available whenever they desired.

In her book, Morton (1991) divided the historical approaches in white-authored and black-authored historiography. White historical accounts depict Black women in a patronizing way which approves of slavery. On the other hand, black-authored accounts of history provide a more genuine representation of conditions in which slaves and freedmen were living.

By Morton's accounts (1991), many of the White historians agree with the fact that, given their new freedom, African American women are going back to their roots, i.e. the barbarianism of their African ancestors. In their opinion, without the moral



guidance of their White owners, African American mothers passed onto their children the promiscuous way of living. Some accounts of White historians go as far as saying that slave women wanted their masters to sexually use them and presented miscegenation as an insult to the white mistress of the household. Historians used slave women's number of childbirths as a means to justify their stance on promiscuity and fecundity of Black women. During the Jim Crow Era, these dehumanizing images continued to appear in white accounts of history. Black women were still portrayed as hypersexualized and lustful. Their demeanor drove their men away from them and, fueled by their jealousy, the men turned to White women.

Morton (1991) further gives examples of Black historians who, on the other hand, provided a different account of slavery and the enslaved. They devoted their work to expose the devaluating aspects of slavery and to contradict the stereotypes that emerged during that time. Booker T. Washington, for example, influenced some historians with his accommodationist theory, which was based on the assumption that slavery enhanced the work-ethic and skills important for the progress of emancipated Black people. William Wells Brown provided an account of slave women as having no greater desire in life than to be seen as a mistress to a white man, degrading African American women in his work. Similarly, Alexander Crummell portrayed African American women as dehumanized and lacking in maternal sentiments. He gives account of their sexual exploitation and the damage done to their maternal instincts, as they were forced into labor, thus abandoning their newborn infants. Crummell also says that their attitudes towards motherhood and family life were permanently damaged, continuing even after emancipation.

### 3.2. Who is the Jezebel?

The Jezebels were characterized as hypersexual, deviant females. This stereotype pictures a black woman with light skin, long hair, and a curvaceous body that she uses to get attention, love, and material goods (Collins, 2000). She is a woman with European features, thin lips and slender nose, which is much closer to the White standards of beauty (West, 1995). She is a seductive woman whose purpose is to fulfill male desires.

As previously mentioned, this particular stereotype was developed as a means to justify the institutionalized rape and sexual abuse of slave women. The prevailing notion behind this was that if they are presented as very sexual beings, their owners/rapists cannot be held accountable for their actions. The Jezebel is, in the eyes of White men and women, seen as a temptress that is constantly available for sexual intercourse. Morton (1991) states that as a clear contrast to the deviant, tempting black woman was the image of the white woman. The White mistresses during the era of slavery were the prime examples of modesty, chastity, self-control, and sexual purity. The Jezebel stereotype is used to present African American women as being aware of man's shortcomings and using them to put a stain on their moral behavior. Intellectuals even used the Scriptures to depict Black women as Jezebels. According to Priest (1969)<sup>2</sup>, Black women were descendants of Jezebel, who was sexually perverse and guilty of numerous acts that defied religious views. Priest even claimed that God himself declared that Africans were due to life in servitude and slavery.

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<sup>2</sup> Simms, R. (2001). "Controlling images and the Gender Construction of Enslaved African Women". *Gender and Society*, (879-897).

Thomas Jefferson, the third president of the United States, and incidentally, one of the founders of the United States Constitution enforced the image of the Jezebel in his book *Notes on the State of Virginia* (Simms, 2001). He provided his opinion on African American women, who to him adopted their objectification as passionate beings who sexually exploit their men. He went even further with his depiction of the Jezebel, and African American people in general, saying that they are not strangers to practicing bestiality, primarily with orangutans.

According to D'Emilio and Freedman (1988)<sup>3</sup>, the seductiveness of black Jezebels can be explained by several instances of slavery. Upon arriving to the slave markets, Black female slaves were often stripped naked and examined in order to see if their reproductive capacities were satisfying. These actions made it easier for White males to fulfill their sexual desires. Likewise, during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, nakedness provided a synonym for the lack of morality, civility, and sexual decency, regardless of whether it was forced on them or of their own volition. Furthermore, slave women often worked in terrible conditions. Their clothes were ripped and torn, and they had to hike their skirts during the summer months due to the heat. For the White males, the image of the Jezebel in this instance provided an opportunity to accept the fact that they forced them to work in those conditions (Vesluys, 2014).

However, D'Emilio and Freedman (1988) also stated there are certain contradictions to this stereotype. Contrary to the beliefs of Whites, on the occasions when slaves engaged in marriage, they rarely chose someone from their bloodline. They sought long-term relationships and monogamy was very important to them. Prostitution, when it was not forced on them, was nonexistent and Black women

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<sup>3</sup> Based on information found on: <https://ferris.edu/HTMLS/news/jimcrow/jezebel/>

suffered from very little diseases. After the slavery era ended and the Reconstruction period began, slaves rushed to officiate their marriages – they even held formal ceremonies. These contradictions greatly undermine the views of Whites towards the promiscuity and insatiable sexual desires of Black women, ones they held above everything to uphold their own moral standards.

In more recent times, the image of the Jezebel changed into one that projected higher moral values. According to Brown et al. (2013), modern depictions of the Jezebel portray a woman that is entirely in control of her own sexuality, she has turned herself into an independent and emancipated woman. Although she was oppressed and wrongly depicted for centuries, she managed to rebel against it and 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.

*“Additionally, modern depictions of the Jezebel image not only portray African American women as hypersexual, they are also shown as being in complete control of their sexuality. Though it is questionable how much control these women truly have over their sexuality (Townsend et al. 2010), some women may find this perception of sexual power enticing, given the devalued status they may experience as a result of racism, sexism and/or classism.” – Brown et al. (2013:527)*

However, despite the newly positive approaches to African American women’s sexuality, there are still negative renditions of the Jezebel stereotype. According to Stephens and Phillips (2003), the new versions include the *Gold Digger* who trades sexual favors 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, and as Collins (2000) added, the *Hoochie*, a woman who uses her sexually deviant personality to attract men just for the pleasure.

### 3.3. Representations of the Jezebel

The fascination of White men with women of color began when they set foot in Africa and discovered the voluptuous women of the continent. Their fascination with the body of one woman, in particular, is noted throughout history and has many renditions. The woman in question was Saartjie Baartman, also called the *Hottentot Venus*. According to Davis and Tucker-Brown (2013), Baartman was an African American woman who became the prototype for many of the stereotypes about other African American women, including that of the Jezebel. She was an enslaved woman, whose body and genitalia was placed on exhibition because the White society regarded it as both sensational and primitive at the same time. At these exhibitions, the *Hottentot Venus* wore little clothing, which furthered her appearance as a sexually deviant woman. Even after her death, she was used as an object of fascination, continually being put on display (Collins, 2000).

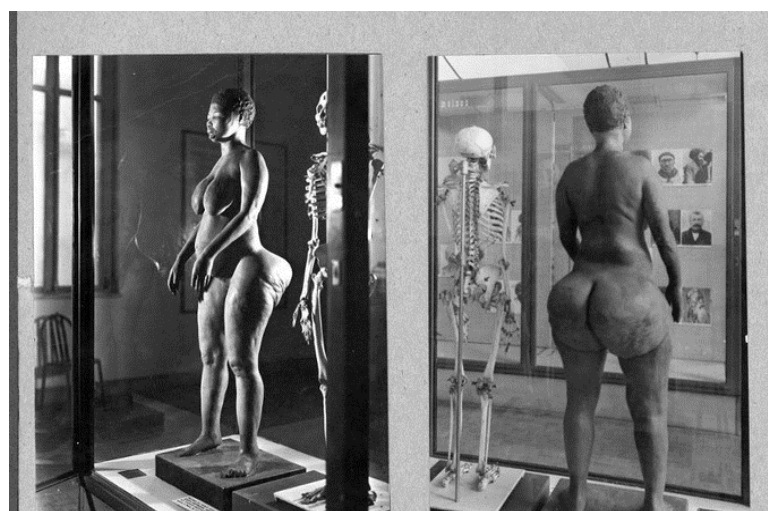


Figure 1 Saartjie Baartman on exhibit in Paris

Throughout history, many objects and souvenirs were fabricated to further the continual use of the Jezebel stereotype. According to Pilgrim (2012), these representations can be divided into two categories: pathetic others and exotic others.<sup>4</sup> Pathetic others are unattractive, unintelligent and lacking in civilized manners. They depict Black women in disproportionate manners – with over exaggerated lips, drunk and with sagging breasts. Oftentimes, they are naked or nearly naked. The pathetic other objects were created to contradict claims that White men find Black women desirable. The exotic others, as opposed to them, are presented in a very sexual way. They are portrayed as being extremely attractive, topless or completely nude, alluding to their sexual promiscuity.

Many everyday items quickly adorned the image of the lascivious Jezebel, such as ashtrays, banners, postcards, and glasses.<sup>5</sup> During the 1950s, a very popular object that used the Jezebel stereotype were the Zulu Lulu sticks. They were a set of swizzle sticks used for stirring drinks, portraying naked African American women of different ages.

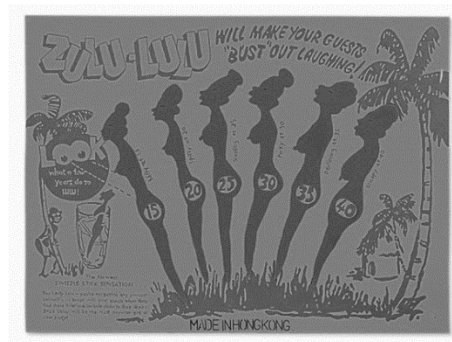


Figure 2 Zulu Lulu sticks

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<sup>4</sup> Based on the information found on: <https://ferris.edu/HTMLS/news/jimcrow/jezebel/>

<sup>5</sup> Based on information found on : <https://ferris.edu/HTMLS/news/jimcrow/jezebel/>

Lucky lure was another example of items depicting African American women as sexual beings. It was a topless bust with a fishing hook. Many postcards were also used to degrade African American women. Some of them even used children, showing them as sexual objects. The pictures showed teenage girls, or sometimes even younger, with their normal faces but with exposed adult sized buttocks, naked or hiding behind towels, trees or other objects. Black women are often portrayed as pregnant or with many children surrounding them, put on postcards or, in the case of president Lyndon B. Johnson, on license plates.



*Figure 3 Lucky Lure*



*Figure 4 Lyndon B. Johnson licence plate*

#### **4. The Jezebel in the media**

*Undesirable in the conventional sense, which defines beauty and sexuality as desirable only to the extent that it is idealized and unattainable, the black female body gains attention only when it is synonymous with accessibility, availability, when it is sexually deviant. – bell hooks (1992:65-66)*

With the developments in technology and the development of media, the Jezebel was soon found in nearly all forms of mass media. From the Internet and magazines to television shows, movies, and music. The image of the Jezebel, and African American women in general, followed the views of the Whites held during slavery and the Jim Crow Era. Many roles and portrayals of women of color in mass media took the form of one of the common stereotypes, from the Mammies to the Jezebels. They are being portrayed as overly sexual, at times even aggressive, which is contradictory to the image of the submissive sexual image of a white woman. The impact of such stereotypical portrayals furthered the negative images imposed on women of color. However, some of the portrayals were used as a form of rebellion against common misconceptions and were actually used to bolster the public opinion of women of color.

According to Collins (2005), mass media produced a new way for racial differences to be present in everyday lives of both Blacks and Whites. It also transformed the ways in which sexual stereotypes were present in society, they could be seen through animal prints, song lyrics and overwhelming appreciation of the female breasts and buttocks. Black women were submitted to roles and images that were previously constructed, and they presented them as immoral, deviant and lacking manners (Tounsel, 2015). Media technologies made it possible for common controlling and stereotypical images of Black women to be seen in the comfort of bedrooms or



living rooms. Sexual scenarios are particularly popular in mass media productions; sex is used to sell everything. This particularly enables the excessive amounts of sexual interpretations of female bodies, mostly Black women's bodies that carry with them the connotation of lacking sexual morality more than White women.

Mass media lacked opportunities for Black people which resulted in media intended specifically for a Black audience (Baker, 2005). Black-oriented media was seen as an opportunity to present Black women in a positive light. However, researchers (Coltrane and Messineo, 2000; McLaughlin and Goulet, 1999) still found that not even that managed to minimize the number of images portraying Black women in a negative light. However, according to Baker (2005), the images of African American women found in media now have less repressive connotations. They present African American women as strong and independents, as opposed to the image that portrayed them as deviant in the past.

Media's representation of African American women's bodies as expendable has caused them to choose between intensely resisting it and assimilating to it. They can either take control over the negative stereotypes about them, or they can use them to gain benefits from them (Hooks, 1992). African American culture is highly present in modern American movies, fashion, and music, which are commonly used to shape the societies believes about race, gender, and sexuality. In this new era of mass media, the image of the Jezebel is also updated. According to Collins (2005), she takes on new forms and names, but essentially her characteristics remain the same. Now dubbed as *Gold Diggers*, *Hustlers*, *Hoes*, *Hoochies* or *Bitches*, her moral values still remain questionable.

#### 4.1. The Jezebel in music

When African American women realized their continuous efforts to present themselves as modest and chaste women by changing aspects of their behavior were resulting in next to no progress, they put their worries and pain into song lyrics. The emergence of the black woman in the entertainment industry, specifically musical, was one of the ways in which Black women could use their voice to present their displeasure with the current oppression they were subjected to. Besides taking on the role of being the advocates for African American women's emancipation from the generalized stereotypes, they oftentimes found themselves in the same derogatory roles of the past. Blues women refused to passively watch the social changes happening around them. Instead, they provided new ways of thinking about those changes, they brought awareness to the social importance of the Black working class in an urban setting (Carby, 1992). Essentially, they gave other Black women the opportunity to seize their freedom.

According to Collins (2005), through their lyrics, blues women defied controlling images of Black women used to objectify them. They used their music to endorse Black feminist traditions and to reject the *Cult of true womanhood*, which glorified White women. Even though blues music was meant for both the Black and white listeners, it was especially significant as a platform to express Black women's self-definition and demanding their respect. Even Aretha Franklin a Black icon, used her voice to demand respect from her partner, and sang about it in the evergreen blues song "Respect".

The most sexualized modern Jezebel can be found in music videos and hip-hop culture. Hip-hop music was developed to empower and support Black women, after

some time it became a platform for, once again, presenting Black women as objects or as very sexual beings (Brown et al, 2013). Oftentimes videos of a hip-hop musician have many Black women in them, flaunting their breasts and buttocks around like it is something they normally do. Davis and Tucker-Brown (2013) said that young women taking part in these videos are often referred to as *Video hoes*, which connects them to the image of the Jezebel in labeling them as promiscuous. Black women are used as visual props, parading in scant clothing, exotically dancing or mimicking inappropriate sexual actions, making it easy for them to be sexualized and objectified (Collins, 2005). Furthermore, this portrayal of Black women turns them into sexual and animalistic creatures, putting the focus on her buttocks. The black woman and her “butt” have been in the limelight for centuries and the fascination never ceases. One of the examples worshipping the black “butt” is the famous song “Baby got back” by Sir Mix a Lot. The main focus in his video is, as the title of the song says, the backside of the woman’s body. The main problem with the video is that the women in it are all black, with the exception of the introduction part where there are two white girls. They are dressed in skin-tight, ultrashort, leathery suits, with their rear-ends being the main focus of numerous shots. When videos by black female rap artists are put under examination, they seem no better than their male colleagues. For example, world-famous rapper Nicki Minaj and her controversial video for “Anaconda” show her and a group of women putting their “Bunz” – their buttocks – in the main focus of the video. They are, once again, wearing tight clothes that reveal more than they cover up. Even Destiny’s Child, the famous girl group of the 90s, and Taylor Swift can be seen as promoting stereotypes of Black women, from wearing animal-print bikinis or using Black women to “twerk” – in other words, shake their buttocks in videos.

According to Reid-Brinkley (2008), one music video even caused a group of students from Spelman College, a historically Black college, to boycott their own publicized event. The video in question is for the song “Tip Drill” by the artist Nelly. In this extremely explicit video, Black women wearing bikinis – or even on occasions nothing – can be seen dancing provocatively, kissing each other, and apparently enjoying themselves. One scene in the video even shows the artist swiping his credit card down the crevice of a woman’s rear end. Reid-Brinkley (2008) goes on to explain that this kind of reaction sparked an idea for the creators behind *Essence* magazine, a magazine for Black women. In the fall of 2004, they decided to do a series of articles as a sign of resistance to the negative representations of Black women in music videos. The series had six goals: to create a platform for discussion, to explore the negative images in videos and lyrics, to balance the representations of Black women, to encourage readers to be self-reflecting, to promote positive representations, and to provide a platform for activist involvement in the campaign.

These videos maintain the continued assault on the sexual integrity of Black women’s bodies. What is even worse is the fact that Black women in music videos usually conform to objectifying their own bodies so as to be acknowledged in a society led by Black males (Collins, 2005). More projects like the one *Essence* magazine did over a decade ago must be carried out, if only to make the world think more about the content they are watching or listening to.

#### 4.2. Literature

Black women writers used their media outlet to provide an inclusive view of their struggles. They wanted to offer a more positive image of black womanhood in contrast to the derogatory ones. Internalized oppression, or more accurately the ways in

which black women have been oppressed, has been a focal point of their writing. Mary Hellen Washington (1982)<sup>6</sup> provided two views of women in Black literature. On the one hand, the suspended woman characterized a black woman as one that stands in time and place, the pain and violence making it very difficult for her to make anything better in her life. She escapes to the world of religion, alcohol, drugs, accepting in that way her subordination and conforming to the stereotypical images. On the other hand, Washington delivers the image of the assimilated woman who is more aware of her conditions, but still makes no use of this awareness. She lives in denial of the color of her skin, denying any connections to black women in her surroundings.

In the literary world of Black writers, the image of the Jezebel is frequently present, often as a character that brings her community to ruins with her evil and impulsive sexuality. However, writers develop the character in ways which, in the end, portray the Jezebels as having more moral fiber. She turns into an innovative, independent woman completely in control of her behavior and desires. According to Brown (2015), one example of a Jezebel character that embraces her sexuality is the character of Esther in James Baldwin's "*Go Tell It on the Mountain*". Esther is a character that takes responsibility for her own sexual actions, and even lessons her partner to be more cautious about his behavior. Through her, Baldwin tries to prove that being a sensual and sexual person does not necessarily mean you are incapable of development, having pride in your actions and not feeling ashamed for acting out your desires. Brown (2015) goes on to say that in her novel "*The Color Purple*" Alice Walker introduces us to the character of Shug Avery. She is a Blues singer proud of her sexuality. However, her community – and especially the church – do not approve of her

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<sup>6</sup> Collins H., P. (2000). *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. New York: Routledge.

behavior, seeing her as a promiscuous and self-centered woman. They reject her on accounts of the ways in which she shields her true self from the world, without trying to get to know her. Her relationship to a young woman named Celie can be seen as Walker trying to battle the Jezebel stereotype. Shug passes her sexual knowledge to the inexperienced Celie, teaching her about the ways in which she can liberate her sexuality. In this way, Walker unravels the knowledge and awareness the Jezebel woman can have about her own sexuality, as well as the sexuality of others.

The literary world is a great instrument to voice the importance of changing the ways in which the world sees Black women regarded as Jezebels. It provides a timeless platform for emphasizing the negative connotations this particular stereotype has for the lives of Black women, but it is also a place where the development of positive images and portrayals of the Jezebels can take place. Literature allows its audience a chance to get to know the characters, and thus learn of the importance of not judging a book by its cover.

#### 4.3. Films and television shows

In the world of mass media, films and television shows are the main attractors of public and therefore can be used to convey the controlling images and stereotypes the most. Directors and producers of films and shows need to follow trends to attract the masses, with the goal of making money. They use the stereotypical images to best portray the common opinions about race, gender, and sexuality. Images of African Americans in this field began with theatrical productions that commodified the white societies opinions and views, often using blackface on white actors. In the early years of film production, people of color were often characters that were submitted to ridicule. Catherine and John Silk (1990) provided two possible reasons for that. The first one

was to construct a sense of unity between the Northern and the Southern states in the aftermath of the Civil War. Having different views on slavery, an image that would attract the opposing sides needed to be portrayed. Both regarded the Black race as inferior to them, so the image of a non-aggressive black was created. The second reason was that the ability to produce longer films arose, meaning that the filmmakers needed to attract as many viewers as possible. For this reason, they conformed their portrayal of African Americans.

The 1970s saw the beginning of Blaxploitation films. According to Francois (2013), this era of film production offered new views on stereotypical representations of both male and female African American characters. This was made possible because Blaxploitation films were written, directed, acted and produced by mostly Black people. Blaxploitation films portrayed Black women in the stereotypical images, mostly as the Jezebels. They rarely got the main role but were instead depicted as prostitutes, drug addicts or as characters who have no control over the situations in which they find themselves in. They were shown wearing exposing clothes, which the public criticized because they saw it as promoting White stereotypes of Blacks. Oftentimes, Black women in these films took on the roles of sexually deviant women, most commonly that of the prostitute. They were shown in very graphic scenes in which the black female was depicted as a sexual animal. However, they showed more inherent control over their sexuality, which can be seen as an improvement. Films like "*Foxy Brown*" and "*Cleopatra Jones*" show black women as the protagonists, women that are in complete control of both their sexuality and their actions (Francois, 2013). Both Foxy and Cleopatra were rebels and heroines, fighting against anybody who mistreated them. These positive portrayals were much needed for Black women, as they could now relate to their heroines and gain control over both their lives and sexuality.



Figure 5 Foxy Brown and Cleopatra Jones movie posters

Another common portrayal of African Americans in films can be seen in the role of the magical Negro. This role portrays male and female African Americans as faithful and kind helpers to the white protagonist. Entman and Rojecki (2001) said there are three main purposes of the magical Negro: to assist the main character, to help them explore and employ their spirituality, and to use their wisdom to solve the dilemma of the white character. The magical Negro, as an African American woman, also takes on the stereotypical portrayals of the Jezebel and the Mammy. When it comes to the controlling images of the Jezebel in this role, she assumes her sexualized persona by either using her sexual knowledge to assist the protagonist and better his knowledge of sex or by being a sexual fantasy of a character in the film (Francois, 2013).

Reality television and television shows are the most prominent informational tool to convey stereotypical images to the wider public. The viewers have a tendency to believe the representations they are shown are the truth. They mistake the false and



staged representations for the real ones because they have nothing to compare them with, having to connections to the culture they so quickly judged. Reality television has a big impact on the modern pop culture. According to Tyree (2011), the many negative and inaccurate images of Black women found in them pose a problem as they continue to spread false conception. Reality shows often portray Black women as the modern day Jezebel by portraying them in tight and provocative clothing, alluding to their promiscuity.

According to Tounsel (2015), a great platform to attract an audience willing to believe the portrayals of culture, gender and race are television shows. Series such as "*The Cosby Show*" or "*The Fresh Prince of Bel Air*" had African Americans in leading roles, providing positive and comedic portrayal. However, a positive female character was still hard to find. One of the rare positive images of African American women to this day is that of Clair Huxtable from "*The Cosby Show*". Clair presents a working mom of five, and a professional in her field that is yet sexually desirable. Her behavior is neither too aggressive nor too soft. She is at the same time strong, yet not strong enough to be perceived as undesirable – she embodies both the Mammy and the Jezebel stereotypes using only their best qualities, without being tempted to the negative ones (Tounsel, 2015). Tounsel (2015) further states that a more modern portrayal of a Jezebel character can be found in Olivia Pope, from the popular show "*Scandal*", or in Annalise Keating of the drama series "*How to Get Away with Murder*". Olivia Pope is a successful, educated and likable woman with a job that gives her access to very powerful people. She is also seen as a woman having her life organized by the men in her life, just from the fear of losing her. The Jezebel in Olivia can be seen in her affair with a married man and having another lover at the same time. This can be seen as a sign of her insatiable sexual desires, which is a common trait used to depict the Jezebels.

Moreover, she can be seen in scenes where she puts her sexuality on display and succumbs to the lust she is feeling. Even though she does everything to make sure she is not seen as a promiscuous woman of loose sexual morals, the people around her often use demeaning terms when either talk to her or about her, much like the society does to real African American women considered to be the Jezebels (Versluys, 2014). Annalise Keating, although not a typical representation of the Jezebel due to her dark skin, uses her sexuality to form and uphold relationships with men from both her private and professional life. Before she married her white husband, she was his mistress – thus presenting a modern way of seducing an innocent white male that was one of the starters of the Jezebel stereotype. Furthermore, her husband confessed that he approached her because she seemed easy and because he saw her as an extremely appealing woman. This statement meant that, inadvertently, Annalise was to blame for his transgression because of her voluptuous curves and sexual appeal. The part of Annalise's story that most confirms her status as a modern Jezebel is the fact that she had an affair with a married man, whose wife was terminally ill, only to be able to use him for her own benefit.

African American women in modern depictions of Jezebel in television series and reality television prove that the stereotypical portrayals will probably never cease to exist, they only change parts of their defining characteristics to be more in touch with the current societal views.

## 5. Effects of sexual stereotypes

*The detrimental impact of the current sexualized images is also increased by the possible internalization of these stereotypes by African American girls and women. For some, the bombardment of sexualized images from the media, their communities and their peers may influence their sexual socialization, leading them to believe that sexuality is their only asset or source of esteem. – Brown (2013:527)*

As previously mentioned, contemporary sexual scripts of African American girls and women provide a structure by which they can understand their sexuality and the threats, violence, and abuse that follow it. Responses to sexual scripts revolve around debunking the expectations from them by resisting to sexual coercion, being self-reliant and assuming more responsibility in abusive relationships, or by finding authentic sexual desire by supporting one another (French, 2012).

According to Brown et al. (2013), the media and its representations of African American women have greatly influenced the ways in which African American women see themselves and therefore how they behave or interpret their self-worth in a community that uses these representations to make generalized opinions of them. Stereotypes are used to form such opinions, be it consciously or subconsciously. People are subjected to seeing other cultures through pre-conceived stereotypes and learn to react to them from the mediated representations. Most commonly, African American women and their sexuality are portrayed through the image of the Jezebel. As previously mentioned, films, videos, and television series are used to convey images of a modern version of the Jezebel – as a video girl, *Gold Digger* or even a *Diva* – all of whom use their sexuality to either further their career or improve their social status.

The portrayal of African American women as promiscuous brings about the notion that sexual assaults happen because the victim behaved in a way that facilitated it. The continuous exposure to media and their images of African American women may lead to internalizing those sexualized images and, in turn, making them believe their sexuality is their primary source of self-esteem (Brown et al, 2013). The controlling images can be seen as sources of independence and power, as they also show African American women in control of their sexuality. This means that, without intending to, they may help in furthering the image of the hypersexual African American women.

In this new, modern society African American men and women need to take control of their sexuality and give it a new meaning in order to stop the continuing portrayals of them through generalized and old stereotypes.

### 5.1. Sexual decision making

According to Mowatt (2013), a common form of sexual violence and exploitation that African American women encounter is the commercialized sexual exploitation that includes prostitution, sexual servitude, pornography, exotic dancing, and escort services, further resulting in violence and objectification of women.

The prevailing notion that African American women are promiscuous and sexually deviant makes a big impact on how both African American men and women choose to react. Men, as usual, seek ways to profit from this image and subject women to prostitution. The image of the Jezebel here is used to justify the negative treatment of African American women in the circle of prostitution, both from their “manager” and from their customer. Prostitution forms a way of exploiting and commodifying African American women’s sexuality – connecting to the way White slave owners sold

and sexually used their female slaves (Collins, 2000). Mostly, women enter the circle of prostitution after years of sexual abuse and repeated victimization. They succumb to the effects it had on their self-esteem and mental health. It not only caused them physical and emotional harm but created a chain of victimization that was detrimental to their futures.

Similar to prostitution, another form of sexual exploitation that relies heavily upon the image of the hypersexual African American women is pornography. According to Noble (2012), the majority of content on the Internet regarding African American women and girls is hypersexual and pornographic. Pornography generally objectifies women, but when it comes to African American women, it mostly uses the images of them conceived by White males. They are often found representing false ideas from the past, such as the notion of African American women as *Hoes*, which was preceded by the image of the Jezebel. The African American women in pornographic films confirm the belief of the promiscuous and sexually deviant Black woman. By doing so, they enable these misrepresentations to still be present in the lives of African American women today, undermining their chances of gaining control over their sexuality. Inadvertently, they also have a negative effect on social, political and economic recognition of African American women (Noble, 2006).

Another problem that needs to be addressed is sexual abuse. Institutionalized rape of African American women began during slavery, as previously mentioned, and is still continuing today. According to West (2006) and her research, 18,8% of African American women are raped in their lifetime, be it in an academic setting – college or high school, in the army or in the workplace. African American women are often the victims of abuse and rape from people they are close to – their fathers, partners, and men from their neighborhood (Collins, 2005). West (2006) continues to say that 42%

of African American women in impoverished housing developments have been either threatened in a way or male partners have actually used force for sexual access. What is more, West (2006) concluded that a quarter of African American girls will be raped or sexually abused before the age of 18. Childhood sexual abuse is executed by either a member of their community (such as neighbors, clergy members or strangers) or by family members (fathers, brothers, uncles or grandfathers). Often, childhood sexual abuse was not the only instance in an African American woman's life of the sexual abuse, as those victims are at greater risk for repeated victimization.

Angela Davis concluded that rape was a form of repression and domination with the goal of silencing African American woman's will to rebel (Collins, 2000). The act of raping was often rationalized with the portrayal of African American women as sexualized animals and being promiscuous, thus linking it to the image of the Jezebel. The rape itself affects a woman during the attack but continues to do so in the treatment of rape victims from their family and different institutions. Collins (2000) explains that the justice system, in the case of African American women, rarely stood on their side. Since they were not even protected by law, African American women often opted for silence. The main reason behind this lies in the fact that African American males are mostly behind the rape (Collins, 2005).

In the era of slavery and the postbellum period, African American males were subjected to lynching and severe punishments if they were accused of rape or any kind of sexual abuse. The women wanted to protect them and decided to remain silent. Another factor contributing to this silence is the fact that even when they came forward, the justice system failed them and did not convict the perpetrator. They also remained silent out of fear that their families, friends, and people they are close to would not stay by their side either (Collins, 2005). What is more, as African American women are seen

as promiscuous they often do not speak out because of the reactions the society may have. According to West (2006), the stereotypical images of them avert them from admitting they were raped because society may not even believe them and instead believes in the controlling images about them. Some African American women even claimed that, on the occasion they did report their sexual abuse, members of the police refused to believe them and were instead asking about their clothing choices and sexual history. They decided to cover up the horrible event, and in doing so developed a “politics of silence” (Hammonds, 1997:97). According to Collins (2000) and Hammonds (1997), this was a political strategy formed in the early twentieth century by African American reformers. The purpose of it was to resist negative stereotypes and increasing exploitation that continued even after the end of slavery. With this strategy, they planned to oppose the immoral images of African American women by promoting proper Victorian morality. They hoped it would depict them as worthy of respect and justice. However, by keeping silent in order to present themselves as chaste and moral, they lost the ability to take control of their sexuality.

The victims are often left with emotional damage that makes them develop different forms of coping mechanisms. As Collins (2005) stated, some develop highly mistrusting opinions of men and became afraid, or they develop anxiety issues while others have problems with developing healthy relationships with their partners. West (2006) explained this by giving two possible reasons. On the one hand, they feel ashamed and result in blaming themselves, resulting in lower self-esteem, anger issues, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder or even suicidal thoughts. They abstain from any form of sexual relationships and report less enjoyment from sexual intercourse. On the other hand, they have issues with setting boundaries on their sexuality. They engage in risky behaviors, mainly prostitution and sexual intercourse with multiple partners.

This kind of behavior often results in sexually transmitted diseases and unintended pregnancies, sometimes even substance abuse.



## Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to present the way in which African American women were treated in history and to see if the stereotypical images created to define them have any effect. The treatment of African American women was always an issue of stereotypes formed to define and control them. Many African American women are categorized into stereotypes formed centuries ago, such as the Mammy who was used to validate the exploitation of slaves in the domestic work, the Sapphire which portrays them as loud and masculine women, or the Jezebel which was used to justify the sexual exploitation of female slaves. During slavery, they were mistreated in numerous ways which wound up being their own fault. The controlling White society decided to portray them as hypersexual beings with very loose moral values, which meant that anything that was done to them was not illegal or wrong. Being seen as extremely sexual, African American women often had to endure sexual abuse and rape from their masters and they were never seen as the victims, but instead as the reason for the crime. The White owners defended themselves and their acts by depicting African American women as insatiable, immoral and sexually deviant – meaning that they could not be raped or abused as they were asking for it with their behavior or their looks. It was during this time that the image of the Jezebel was created. The Jezebel stood for a hypersexual, lascivious and attractive woman. For African American female slaves this controlling image only meant that no one was blamed for the horrible acts of violation they were subjected to. Even after slavery ended, and African American women were no longer under the control of white men, they could not escape this stereotype. If possible, they were facing even bigger chances of sexual abuse, as they were now free for all men, not just their owners. When segregation came, they had to endure difficult working conditions for very little pay, they had no legal protection and were still under constant

threat of being abused. What made the biggest impact on the spreading of sexual stereotypes tied to African American women was the emergence of mass media. Music, films, Internet, and even literature all had a major impact on the way African American women are portrayed and treated in contemporary times. Mass media relies on generalized stereotypes to attract audiences, and in the case of African American women, those stereotypes mostly mean they are the deviant or extremely sexual objects that are used to conform and please the standards created by the white society. Music and films portrayed African American women as different versions of the Jezebel. They can be seen wearing revealing clothes, dancing provocatively and using their bodies as a means to advance in society. These women are the standard to which all other African American women are compared to and are, in a way, the root of why African American women are treated the way they are by men. The problem with this particular stereotype is that it invites sexual abuse in the lives of African American women, leading to several consequences that can evolve into dangerous issues. Women who suffer sexual abuse often develop self-worth issues, depression, drug or alcohol addictions, or they have extreme difficulties in setting healthy boundaries in their relationships, and this especially refers to African American women who have less protection than White women.

To conclude, African American women had a very difficult journey from the slavery period until now, and there are still many changes that need to be made to make the societies behavior towards them better. As the society moves forward, so should these negative connotations linked to African American women be put to a minimum and allow them to get the respect they deserve.

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