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The Diary of a Mad Black Woman : An Analysis of Film and Anger

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COMM 460 : Seminar in Digital Rhetoric

Dr. Adria Goldman

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About the Author

Summer J. Allen is a senior Communications and Digital Studies major at the University of Mary Washington with particular research interests in media production. Allen wants to have a greater understanding of African American culture and their contributions to film. As a Black woman, she has experienced stereotyping, discrimination, and the pain of exclusion in school settings. She hopes through her work to reduce those for other students of color. Her future work will focus on communicating the voices and visions of minorities that deserve to be heard, seen, and valued. In the end, she hopes for a more loving, inclusive, and understanding society for all.

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the connection between the angry black woman stereotype in film and reality. This study examined the definition of anger and what it looks like. The researcher hypothesized the presumed misinterpreted behavior of black women in popular media; 1) the role of an angry black woman in film is often exaggerated for entertainment purposes, and 2) anger is often a secondary emotion to fear and sadness. Tyler Perry's *Diary of a Mad Black Woman* was analyzed as an artifact of popular media for signs of anger in Black Women mentally, physically, and emotionally. Portraiture was used as a methodology to distinguish how Perry used a sense of familiarity to reach his audience (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). He painted his characters with their clothing, body types, and skin tones as an artist paints a portrait with line, shape, and color. Research depicts anger is often an emotional response to shame and fear; Black anger, however, is often a response to white supremacy and injustices. Findings show the angry Black woman stereotype dated back to times of slavery as a form of control over Black women. In the 1960's, Malcom X, a prolific leader in the black community noted "the most disrespected person in America is the Black woman" (Wilson,

2021). Black women's resilience and strength is often misinterpreted as irrational aggression.

Despite society's negative connotation, studies suggest expressing emotions like anger is healthy and avoids illnesses.

Keywords: anger, shame, black anger, film, filmic consumption, angry Black woman, stereotyping, Tyler Perry, Madea

Introduction

Overtime, the negative images of Black women in popular media over the years have transitioned from entertainment to stereotyped expectations of reality. Amber Simmons, an author in the Harvard Blackletter Law Journal, wrote that the Angry Black Woman Stereotype in film can be traced to origin as far back as 1951 in a character named Sapphire on the *Amos 'N' Andy* show. The character was known for her bickering, complaining, and reckless attitude towards her husband and others in the show (Simmons, 2020). Simmons states, "the audiences got to know Sapphire as the man-hating, ball-busting, wife, but more importantly, her attitude became synonymous with the attitude of all other Black women " (Simmons, 2020, 33). Today, one could find similarities of Sapphire in Tyler Perry's famous character Madea.

Tyler Perry is a Black American producer, screenwriter, actor, and director with a net worth of \$1 billion dollars. In 2005, he wrote, produced, and starred in his own first debut film *Diary of a Mad Black Woman*. (A&E, 2021)As a film that sold \$50.7 million dollars worldwide and kickstarted a billion dollar series of films, it is necessary to explore and connect the representation of Black women in film to reality. Throughout the film, there are plenty of expressions of anger from Helen, an unexpected divorcee of 18 years, and Madea, Helen's grandmother. The film was inspired by Perry's mother; it is a combination of both entertainment and reality from Perry's own personal experiences (A&E, 2021). The audience finds

entertainment in the comical and exaggerated portrayal of anger in the film. However, the emotions of pain, shame, fear, and sadness portrayed in the film are rooted from Perry's perception of Black women from his childhood.

The Diary of A Mad Black Woman

According to the Merriam-webster dictionary, anger is “a strong feeling of being upset or annoyed because of something wrong or bad: the feeling that makes someone want to hurt other people, shout, etc.” This definition, along with Madea and Helen's character, will be used to indicate specific scenes from the film and analyze what Black female anger looks like. Each scene with perceived anger connects back to research based on the chokehold an angry Black woman stereotype has on Black women.

Helen's first diary entry read “ “Dear diary, to look at us... you would think that we've got it all together. But looks can be deceiving.” (Perry, 2005) In the following minutes, Charles, Helen's husband, returned home with his mistress on his arm; he then asked Helen for a divorce and told her to get out of his house. When Helen refused to leave because she had nowhere else to go, Charles forcibly dragged her out of the front door. The first sign of anger in this scene was when Helen began to shout and beg Charles not to do this. The second sign of anger was the facial expressions on Helen's face when Charles' mistress called her a “weak begging sister”. Her face not only told us that she was upset, but she was also ashamed. Black women are raised to be strong and independent (Simmons, 2020). Helen found shame in being called weak as it exposed her dependence on Charles; she had no job, no titles, and a signed prenup.

The first sign of aggression in the film was introduced by Madea as she answered Helen's knock on her door shouting and waving a gun. Shouting is assumed to be a theme in recognizing anger, however, a gun causes the audience to assume violence. In a study on domestic violence

abuse in Black women, a participant stated “we young black girls had to learn to protect ourselves against physical hurt” (Simmons, 2020). As research explains reasons for these actions, it cannot undo the perception of aggression that is tied to a Black female with a gun who is shouting. While shouting is included in the textbook definition of anger; the audience may still fail to recognize signs of anger in response to the primary emotion of fear. It was midnight when Madea heard the banging on her front door.

The next sign of anger by textbook definition is when Madea learns of how Charles wronged Helen. While Helen’s body language reads mopy and mellow, Madea’s reads mad as she takes Helen back to her home with Charles and encourages her to vandalize his property. “Get mad and rip it”(referring to the Mistresses clothes) Madea said to Helen, “it won’t solve anything but it will make you feel better, so just rip it” (Perry, 2005). The scene shows the two yelling and tearing up a closet full of designer clothing in the house. Their facial expressions had wide eyes and raised eyebrows when they got angry, however, it turned into devious smiles and laughter as they released those emotions. Madea is also shown fighting the mistress, which Merriam-webster tells us is a clear sign of anger.

In the following scene, Madea, known for owning her anger and embracing it; terrorized the house while Helen gathered cash. When Charles walked in on Helen with cash in her hand he became upset; when Helen offered to leave and tried to exit the room, Charles hit her. Madea called him a “bastard”, paced back and forth, had wide eyes, and swung her hands in the air. In an attempt to relieve her obvious anger, she began sawing a sofa in half. “This is for every Black woman that ever had a problem with a Black man!” she screamed (Perry, 2005). This scene supports research on Black women who are domestic violence victims. They report feeling unprotected and state they are taught not to expect any protection from the police or Black men

(Simmons, 2020). According to the Violence Against Women Act, addresses the system Police base off of “primary aggressor language”; they report Black women are the most subjected victim group to mandatory and dual arrests.

Signs like shouting, facial expressions, violence, aggression, etc. can lead one to assume a character is angry. However, Tyler Perry made no mistake when he allowed his characters to voice their own emotions. “Dear diary” said Helen, “today was a bad day. I got up and came to church because I was so angry” (Perry, 2005). In this scene, Helen was calmly sitting at a table, she had no raised tone, facial expressions, or signs of aggression; just a state of ease. Further in the film, Helen spent four happy months with her new love interest and soon to be fiance. However, things took a turn when Charles was shot and left paralyzed; Helen returned home to care for him as his mistress ran off. “Dear diary” said Helen “I realized this house holds a painful memory for me, something in me wants to make him suffer even more. Four months can take you through just as many emotions as 18 years of marriage. And I’m starting to feel all of them at once. But the one that is clear is rage. Signed, a mad Black woman” (Perry, 2005). Helen is next shown torturing and humiliating Charles; she screamed, laughed, cried, smiled, frowned, and violently threw him into a tub.

While these scenes, along with plenty others, allow the audience to visualize anger, there is no textbook definition of what anger should look like. While Madea was pictured being constantly angry and aggressive, Helen was pictured both mad and at ease as well as mad and in a rage. Similar signs of anger in Black women does not determine whether or not she is in fact angry. Factually speaking, emotions belong to one individual, therefore a Black woman should only be classified as angry if like Helen, she expresses that is the emotion she is feeling.

Methodology

Portraiture as a method of analysis is a combination of art and science created by Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot, a sociologist, author, Professor, and former student at Harvard University. It captures “the complexity, dynamics, and subtlety of human experience and life” while “interpreting nuances of physicality and personality through artistic elements such as line, color, and composition” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Here, Perry was seen as an artist painting his characters through clothing, body-shape and colorism. Helen was slim, brown-skinned and wealthy to begin the film and her traits were insecure, dependent, and conservative. She was shown wearing different variations of expensive, simple, light pastel colored clothing. Then, during the low-days of her break up, she was shown mostly wearing variations of light blues, grays, and hints of black. However, as her character blossomed towards the end of the film, she became more adventurous, self-loving, and assertive. She wore hot pinks, bright reds, and warm colored clothing that was not expensive, but instead, elegant. Her wardrobe represented her journey to growth as a character. As for Madea, she was a taller, heavier set woman, with no love interests in the film; her wardrobe was made of non-attractive long dresses with quarter sleeves, crazy patterns, and multiple colors. The consistency of dresses was an attest to her consistent character traits throughout the film; she was a non-love interest, bold, and chaotic. She was tough on the exterior with a heart of gold. Her violence and language made her stand out as the original angry Black woman. Lastly, colorism can be found in the film as Charles’ mistress was a Hispanic woman who wore revealing and expensive clothing. Her wardrobe represented a trait of friskiness for proudly sleeping with a married man. Her then expensive taste represented the gold-digger trait of her character as she attempted to sign a Do Not Resuscitate (DNR) order for Charles before wiping out his bank account and abruptly leaving him.

Findings

In order to analyze the misrepresentation of anger in Black women in film, we must first ask the following research questions: 1)What is anger? 2)What are its effects? And 3)What emotions are similar to it? According to the American Psychological Association, anger is “an emotion characterized by antagonism toward someone or something you feel has deliberately done you wrong”. They also suggest anger as a positive way to express negative feelings; author Carol Tavris also attests to that statement. In her book *Anger: The Misunderstood Emotion*, she relates negative emotions to illness; more specifically, she recommends acting out your emotions as you feel them to avoid psychosomatic illness in particular (Tavris, page 102). According to the Cleveland Clinic Hospital, psychosomatic disorder is a psychological condition that causes physical symptoms. This means negative feelings such as anger, shame, and fear can have a physical effect on the human body. The hospital also reports high-blood pressure as one of the most common side effects of anger.

An evolutionary theory of emotion (Gilbert, 1997) based on the evolution of humans connects anger to counterattacks and survival (Hejdenberg & Andrews, 2011). This theory can be compared to a shame-rage theory (Lewis, 1971) based on the idea that shame creates a feeling of powerlessness as well as perceived disapproval of others; in response to this the theory instigates an anger called “humiliated fury”(Lewis, 1971). Anger is classified as a defense emotion along with fear and shame; they often occur in response to a threat of social status and resources leaving them with a mental decision of flight, submission or fight (Gilbert, 2002). An anger scale based on evolutionary and clinical models measured two subscales of anger (STAXI: Spielberger, 1999). First was an “angry temperament”, referring to quick-tempered people, and the second was an “angry reaction”, referring to a person who reacts to criticism (Hejdenberg &

Andrews, 2011). For a visual in filmic purposes, Madea's anger classifies as an angry temperament while Helen's anger was an angry reaction throughout the film to her divorce. More specifically, Black anger is a common response to injustices and white supremacy (Brown, 2018). The author dates Black anger back to segregation and Jim-Crow laws.

Discussion

Portraiture as a methodology reads that "voice is the lens through which the portraitist sees and documents reality"(Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). As the film was led by Helen's narration, it allowed room to make the connections to reality. As the audience found humor in the actions of the characters that portrayed anger, they found reality in the voice. Several times in the film both Madea, and Helen were women enough to admit they were angry. Therefore the reality was, anger looks like Madea when she is sawing a sofa in half, but it also looks like Helen when she is writing in her diary on a sunny day. So despite Helen being the star of a film titled "The Diary of a Mad Black Woman", critics find the most disgust in Madea's character as she represents Black Woman as "combative, loud, aggressive or all of the above " (Simmons, 2020). As a Black Woman, the right to communicate your feelings are often stripped from you and replaced with a label that reads "angry".

The difference between Madea and Helen is that Helen's anger was introduced after the audience saw her primary emotions of sadness and fear; she was weak and broken (a victim). However, Madea's anger was introduced early on as a primary and consistent emotion throughout the film; her character was shown as strong and hostile. Black women are less sympathized because their resilience is mistaken for aggression (Goodmark, 2008). In the legal system, "the battered woman who fights back simply is not a victim in the eyes of many"

(Goodmark, 2008). Black women who are in need of assistance may be overlooked for this reason, or may unfortunately suffer in silence.

Conclusion

Research shows anger impacts emotional, mental, and physical health. Doctors even encourage expressing and releasing anger as a way to remain positive and avoid illness. In Black women, anger is most commonly in response to shame, discrimination, injustice, and white supremacy. However, their resilience when facing adversity is often misinterpreted for anger. Research highlights what anger is and what it feels like, but film visually shows what to expect it to look like. In film, the anger of a Black woman can be associated with name calling, shouting, bickering, eye rolling, harmful thoughts/intentions, facial expressions, hand motions, and body language. Anger can also manifest as fear, shame, and sadness. However, Perry's film shows it may also look like writing in a journal, while sipping tea.

The filmic consumption of a Black woman's rage potentially hinders their ability to equally perform in jobs, avoid being stereotyped, and own their own narratives. Black women are portrayed in reality as they are in films; when they resemble an on screen character, they are presumed to have a synonymous attitude. When your legacy is resilience, your strength can be mistaken for anger. The African women who landed on the shores of America nearly 400 years ago, survived horrific tragedies. Their anger has been studied, manipulated, and silenced throughout history. Black women should be able to feel and express their emotions just as scientists suggest for everyone. If (like Helen and Madea) she chooses to own her emotions and sign her diary as a mad Black woman; then, and only then, should she be labeled as such.

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