

Black Single Mothers Demonized by
Hollywood: A Film Criticism of Precious
(Based on the novel Push by Sapphire)

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Introduction

Black single mothers face many hardships by being stereotyped by the masses. Hollywood's depiction of black single mothers in film creates a stigma/stereotype of how black single mothers are in real life that is not correct. Hollywood demonizes the black single mother. It is important to investigate why Hollywood portrays black single mothers in a way where stereotypes can be created. The literature review was created to raise awareness of racism in Hollywood and stereotypes of black single mothers. The analysis will illustrate hollywood as a racist through the film Precious. A search for published literature was conducted through various databases including Google, academic search complete, e-journals, peer-reviewed articles, and reference lists from key studies were used to find information related to this topic. Approximately 25 documents were reviewed, with 15 being used in the final literature review. Articles are limited to primarily peer- reviewed journals and scholarly works with background information published between 2001 and 2019. The reference lists of key articles were searched to add for discussions throughout the paper and obtained by conducting specific searches through the Purchase College Library database. The following keywords were searched: **single mothers, black single mothers, racism, hollywood and racism, hollywood is racist, precious film, black mothers demonized**. Several articles related to the topic were utilized to illustrate Hollywood and racism and black single mothers. Peer-reviewed articles were utilized to illustrate other people's opinions of the topic to create more discussion.

Literature Review

Introduction

Single mothers are parents who care for one or more children without the physical assistance of the other biological parent. The definition and the legal aspects associated with single mothers may vary according to jurisdictional laws of different regions. The presence of single mothers may arise for a variety of reasons; typically single mothers assume sole responsibility of their child following and adoption, a divorce, artificial insemination, surrogate motherhood, or the result of an unforeseeable occurrence, such as child abuse, child neglect, abandonment, or the death of the biological father (family.laws.com). It is important to know what a single mother is. By acknowledging what a single mother is, the reader will be able to understand the trials, tribulations, and hardships they face. Interpersonal communication is the process by which people exchange information, feelings, and meaning through verbal and non-verbal messages: it is face-to-face communication. Interpersonal communication is not just about what is actually said- the language used- but *how* it is said and the non-verbal messages sent through tone of voice, facial expressions, gestures, and body language (<https://www.skillsyouneed.com/interpersonal-skills.html>). Interpersonal communication will be utilized to analyze how an audience develops a relationship with a character in the film *Precious* to real world black single women and if a stigma/stereotype is created. This topic fits within the discipline of communication because this topic can help to discuss the impact interpersonal communication will have between a black single mother and child as seen in *Precious*. The

impact interpersonal communication will have between a film and the audience. The impact of Hollywood's relationship with their audience and black single mothers' reputation.

Methods

An interview is used to hear the opinion of a person in real time. The researcher will construct qualitative research in the use of an informal interview/participant observation. After viewing the film *Precious*, the researcher will obtain opinions from the audience (researcher's mother) to obtain research. Relationship development between the researcher and audience after watching the film can help the researcher to receive better results and learn about the audience's opinions without the idea of "pressure" or "anxiety". The researcher wants the participant to be allowed to feel they can speak freely like they are having a regular conversation.

Hollywood and Racism defined

Racial barriers continue to exist even if they've been diminished partially over the years. In the film and television worlds, only white lives mattered, and the rest of the people were either marginalized or demonized. Race is not biological but socially constructed. Hollywood dramatized racial differences as natural and fixed. Mass media institutions such as Hollywood are major transmitters of racist ideologies. Hollywood's dominant narratives as whites as heroes and actors of color as sidekicks or villains legitimize and reproduce the racial hierarchies existent in US society, (Wang Yuen, Nancy. *Reel Inequality: Hollywood Actors and Racism*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University, 2016.) Hollywood almost uses black people as an idea to create entertainment in a negative way. There is an obsession with black tragedy. If you see a black movie, it's typically historical, and it tends to deal with the pain black people went through. There have been some excellent films made in that vein, and there are some painful

parts of black history that should be explored, but it is kind of weird that only those films bubble up to the surface. It's people who are enduring these horrible tragedies, or they're saint-like. Black single mothers maintain resiliency, despite having family provider role strain (e.g., low income, joblessness, and underemployment). Guided by a strengths-based role strain and adaptation approach that addresses how ethnic-specific strengths facilitate resilience across the life course, (Mendenhall, Ruby, Bowman, Phillip J., and Zhang, Libin. "Single Black Mothers' Role Strain and Adaptation Across the Life course.(Report)." *Journal of African American Studies* 17.1 (2013). Single motherhood has been associated with negative mental and physical health outcomes. For example, research demonstrates that being a single mother is associated with prolonged stress due to long work hours and unaided child rearing (Fritzell et al. 2007; Rousou et al. 2013). Furthermore, single mothers tend to experience higher rates of mood disorders, anxiety disorders, and depressive symptoms compared to their married counterparts, (<http://web.b.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=1&sid=eea5025b-aa95-4047-8f8a-585fb395c82e%40pdc-v-sessmgr05>).

Historical Perspective

This research analyzes how African American middle- and upper-middle-class mothers understand their work and family decision making in relation to two controlling images—the Strong Black Woman (SBW) and the Welfare Queen—that they describe regularly confronting in their lives. In-depth interviews with 60 African American middle- and upper middle-class mothers reveal the strategies these mothers use to overcome assumptions that they are poor, single mothers on welfare or, alternatively, are self-reliant and resilient caregivers who do not need help. (Dow, Dawn Marie. "Negotiating 'The Welfare Queen' and 'The Strong Black

Woman': African American Middle-Class Mothers' Work and Family Perspectives.”

Sociological Perspectives 58.1 (2015): 36–55. Web.) The article discusses the abundance of films in 2013 that deal with African-American and international black issues and experiences.

Examples of 2013 movies with work by black film artists about the black experience include

"The Butler," directed by Lee Daniels and the British movie "Mandela:Long Walk to Freedom"

starring Idris Elba. Actress Alfre Woodard, who stars in the film "12 Years As a Slave,"

mentions the general movie going public's excitement about film offerings in 2013, (Gaydos,

Steven. ““People Films’ Prosper: Kudos Show Reflects Season’s Rich Roster of Black Cinema

offerings.(HOLLYWOOD FILM AWARDS).” *Variety* 321.15 (2013).Print.) The article offers

film criticism of the motion picture "Precious," directed by Lee Daniels, based on the novel

"Push" by Sapphire, characterizing the film as a horror film. Topics include the depiction of the

character Mary (played by the actress Mo'Nique) as a bad mother, parallels to the horror films

"Psycho" and "Carrie," and the portrayal of incestuous rape by the father character Carl in the

film. Other topics include abjection, illiteracy, and sexual deviance, (Regester, Charlene et al.

“Monstrous Mother, Incestuous Father, and Terrorized Teen: Reading Precious as a Horror

Film.” *Journal of Film and Video* lxxvii.1 (2015): 30–45. Web.) Black families headed by single

mothers make up about one third of all black families in the US. But contrary to prevailing

stereotypes, a very large number of single black women are educated beyond high school.

According to a new census study, nearly 44% of black single mothers have been to college,

Anonymous. “The College Education of Black Single Mothers.” *The Journal of Blacks in Higher*

Education 46 (2004): 33.Web.) The tenacity of the intensive mothering ideology—the notion

that good mothers should invest vast amounts of time, money, energy, and emotional labor in

mothering—is well documented, particularly among affluent White mothers. Drawing on 16 interviews with low-income, Black single mothers, we analyze how gender, race, class, and the ideology of intensive mothering intersect to shape these mothers' parenting, (Elliott, Sinikka, Powell, Rachel, and Brenton, Joslyn. “Being a Good Mom: Low-Income, Black Single Mothers Negotiate Intensive”).

Effects of Racism and Stereotypes

The erosive effects of racism: reduced self control mediates the relation between perceived racial discrimination and substance use in African American adolescents, (Gibbons, Frederick X et al. “The Erosive Effects of Racism: Reduced Self-Control Mediates the Relation Between Perceived Racial Discrimination and Substance Use in African American Adolescents.” *Journal of personality and social psychology* 102.5 (2012): 1089–1104. Web.) Racism doggedly structures American social life and institutions. In February 2014-Black History Month-The New York Times reported and editorialized on several racial inequalities and racist events, including overly harsh and racially patterned disciplinary policies in schools; the impact of mass incarceration on disenfranchisement; racial gaps in access to conventional mortgages, (Kwate, Naa Oyo A., and Goodman, Melody S. “Cross-Sectional and Longitudinal Effects of Racism on Mental Health Among Residents of Black Neighborhoods in New York city.(Report).” *The American Journal of Public Health* 105.4 (2015): n. pag. Print.) Surveyed over 600 adolescents and their parents to examine adolescent problem behaviors in single-mother families, (Thomas, George. “The Effects of Single Mother Families and Nonresident Fathers on Delinquency and Substance Abuse in Black and White Adolescents.” *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 58.4 (1996): 884–894. Web.)

Strategies to resolve racism and stereotypes

The design principles developed by the CODA panel are meant to provide guidelines for action to those selecting or developing strategies to improve intergroup relations. They are also meant to focus discussion and research on the characteristics of program effectiveness, (<https://www.tolerance.org/professionaldevelopment/strategies-for-reducing-racialand-ethnic-prejudice-essential-principles>). Current findings, along with evidence that societal stereotypes have damaging effects, underscore the importance of diversifying images of Black women and increasing awareness of how stereotypes affect perceptions of Black women, (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5096656/>). The 2010 census reported that 40 percent of births happen out of wedlock. This number is even higher for Black women and other women of color. When it comes to white women, the single mother narrative is becoming increasingly positive, but increased acceptance, understanding, and support has yet to be extended to single Black mothers. In discussions on closing the racial opportunity gap, blaming systemic inequities on absent fathers and the inadequacies of present mothers continues to be deemed an acceptable viewpoint across the political spectrum, (<http://aapf.org/black-singlemothers>.) Dealing with biases and stereotypes is depleting, and serves to tear single parents down, rather than build them up so they have the best chance of succeeding, (A Conversation about Single Parenting: Challenging the Stereotypes, Article: Patricia Leavey, 2017 October).

Conclusion and recommendations

As presented in the literature, Hollywood can be seen as racist. Racism continues to live on because Hollywood continues to portray black women negatively. A stigma creates when people view black single mothers in films the same way over and over again. Not only does a stigma create, but a stereotype creates as well. The literature presented has led the writer of this review to examine areas they never knew before. The literature allows for examination of future research. Stereotypes can have a negative impact on victims (black single mothers). Stereotypes can affect black single mothers mental health and well-being. The negative stigma created by Hollywood creates the stereotype that Black single mothers are less than other single mothers.

ANALYSIS

METHODOLOGY OF FILM ANALYSIS

To construct research, the researcher will use textual and reception analysis. Textual analysis is a qualitative methodology that involves understanding language, symbols, and/or pictures present in texts to gain information regarding how people make sense of and communicate life and life experiences. Visual, written, or spoken messages provide cues to ways through which communication may be understood. Often the messages are understood as influenced by reflective of larger social structures. For example, messages reflect and/or may challenge historical, cultural, political, ethical contexts for which they exist. Therefore, the analyst must understand the broader social structures that influence the messages present in the text under investigation, (SAGE Communication Research). Reception Analysis is conducted through a qualitative interview which is semi-structured and designed to elicit “thick descriptions” of lived experiences. An interview is used to hear the opinion of a person in real time. After viewing the film *Precious*, the researcher will obtain opinions from the audience (researcher’s mother) to obtain research. Relationship development between the researcher and audience after watching the film can help the researcher to receive better results and learn about the audience’s opinions without the idea of “pressure” or “anxiety”. The researcher wants the participant to feel like they can speak freely as if they are having a regular conversation.

TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

Racism is prejudice, discrimination, or antagonism directed against someone of a different race based on the belief that one's own race is superior. A stereotype is a widely held but fixed and oversimplified image or idea of a particular type of person or thing. Hollywood has created a stigma of black single mothers by creating films about them with racism and stereotypes.

Precious, the film, based on the novel Push by Sapphire is a film that people need to prepare for in advance. The graphic imagery of physical and mental abuse, stereotypes, and racism within the film create a negative image of black single mothers. A single mother is a parent who cares for one or more children without the physical assistance of the other biological parent. In the film, it is implied that Mary is a single mother to Precious because the father Carl, left them.

According to Marc Bernardin, Hollywood almost uses black people as an idea to create entertainment in a negative way. There is an obsession with black tragedy. If you see a black movie, it's typically historical, and it tends to deal with the pain black people went through. The film Precious portrayed a lot of black tragedy and it can be argued that the tragedy seen in this film can be based off of historical tragedy. There have been some excellent films made in that vein, and there are some painful parts of black history that should be explored, but it is kind of weird that only those films bubble up to the surface. It's people who are enduring these horrible tragedies, or they're saint-like.

Abuse

Throughout the film, Precious is abused and this abuse is reiterated over and over again. Her mother Mary says things to her like "I should've aborted you," "You're a lying whore," "You're a dummy, don't nobody want you," and called her a "fat bitch" multiple times. Hollywood really

exaggerated this movie. The acting almost is hard to watch because it becomes painful to watch. Precious (Claireece Jones) is a 16-year-old junior high school student. In the beginning of the film, we see her in school fantasizing about marrying her math teacher. Later in this scene, she is called to the principal's office. It is then brought to the audience's attention that Precious is pregnant with her second child. If verbal abuse from her mother isn't enough, the audience finds out that she is having her second child by her father. This is incest and way beyond physical, mental, and emotional abuse. This is real trauma and it's sickening. Mary (Precious' mother) resents Precious because her boyfriend Carl (Precious' father) wanted to have sex with Precious over her. Hollywood didn't depict the rape scenes too graphic but the idea of Precious being raped by her father is graphic enough to have an audience think further into that fact. Also, it is implied that Mary molests Precious by making Precious perform sexual acts on her. There is a scene where Mary is seen masturbating in her room and Precious is seen in another room waiting for her to come down the stairs. Soon after, Mary calls for Precious and says "Come take care of mommy Precious." Although, there is no scene with visual proof of molestation, it is still implied and this is disgusting. It's also sad because Precious was molested by both her mother and father. The abuse seemed to never end for this poor girl. Precious never knew real love since the day she was born. In the film, it is stated that Carl (Precious' father) started molesting her at the age of 3. As a mother, how can you allow the man you created your child with to touch your baby in that way.

Education

It is not a surprise that Mary and Precious are portrayed as poor black single mothers. The depiction of education that Precious and Mary lacked wasn't a surprise to see either. According

to the Journal of Blacks in Higher Education, Black families headed by single mothers make up about one third of all black families in the US. But contrary to prevailing stereotypes, a very large number of single black women are educated beyond high school. In regards to the film, this statement is false. Precious and her mother both have little to no education at all. This is how a stigma or stereotype can be created by Hollywood. The stereotype of black single mothers and how they are dumb or don't educate themselves. Precious doesn't know how to read or write and neither does her mother Mary. Precious couldn't educate herself at first because her mother didn't allow it. This didn't mean that she was dumb or incapable of learning. Precious enjoys being in school but doesn't have time to take school seriously since she has to cater to her mother 24/7. Precious goes to school but doesn't learn much.

Welfare Queen

Mary holds Precious back on purpose because she wants Precious to believe that she is worth nothing so she'll cling to her always to be able to provide her welfare checks. Since Mary "takes care" of Precious and Precious' daughter Mongo, she receives welfare checks to essentially take care of them. What is interesting is that, Mary nor Precious takes care of Mongo. Instead, Mary's mother and Precious grandmother Tootsie takes care of Mongo. Grandma Tootsie brings Mongo over every week when the social worker comes to visit to see how things are going inside the household so welfare checks can be received. Welfare queen is a derogatory term used in the United States to refer to women who allegedly misuse or collect excessive welfare payments through fraud, child endangerment, or manipulation. Mary can be seen as the Welfare queen in the film. Not only does she receive the checks through fraud but also child endangerment. In the film, she refers to Mongo who has down syndrome (due to incest) as an animal. She puts on an act

when the social worker is around like she's the best grandmother and mother in the world but in reality, she's abusive. Precious tries to stay positive in an abusive environment by zoning out every time her mother is being toxic and fantasizes about how she wishes her life was.

RECEPTION ANALYSIS

An interview was conducted with an audience participant, who is a black single mother.

Reception analysis is constructed to provide insight of how a black single mother feels about hollywood's depiction of them in the film Precious. This analysis is included to help the reader understand how Hollywood demonizes Black single mothers in film based on the opinion of a black single mother.

Interview (Anonymous- Black Single Mother)

The researcher started the interview by asking the participant basic questions regarding their demographics and interests as an ice breaker.

Hollywood

How do you think Hollywood portrayed Mary in this film?

“Hollywood portrayed Mary as a mother horribly. They over dramatized the mother; no parent can be that awful to their child.”

How do you feel about Hollywood after viewing this film?

“I don't know how I feel about Hollywood. Hollywood demonized Monique (Mary) and made her look extremely ghetto. The worst I've ever viewed any mother to be. I've never seen a film like this film. It is one in a million as dark and horrible. I'm sad I saw this movie because I look for bright and happy stories. I was disgusted because how can you watch your daughter get raped, the mental abuse, the physical abuse. It was an awful

display. I'm surprised this film was released. I feel like this film has paved the way for films to become worse for black communities. Precious is loving and caring to her children. I was saddened, disgusted, the movie was awful. I felt the tragedy. It was the worst thing I've ever seen.

Everything that the participant stated I agree with after viewing this film. It's interesting to me that this film was able to be released.

Welfare Queen/Workfare

What are your opinions of "the system" in the film? How does "the system" compare in the real world?

"The system wasn't helping Mary. Mary was home doing nothing and was able to work. Instead of her trying to fix her life, she was waiting on a check and using her child and grandchild to get it. I think they should have taught Mary how to be able to be independent enough to get a check. Being a black single mother who has been on welfare before, I never waited around when it came to "the system". I had to do what I had to do to support my daughter. "The system" is built to help you out of the struggle not to put you into one. Mary is portrayed to not want to provide for her child."

Precious's file reflects the government "workfare" point of view, that Precious should already be earning her own living, possibly as a home attendant. Precious objects violently to this idea. Have Precious's arguments changed any opinions you previously held on this subject?

"I don't understand the social worker's point of view. Precious is 17. She should be able to receive some type of education because so far, the system has failed her. Yes, she should be working to provide for her children as any mother should, but she is only 17.

It's sad because almost everyone has failed this poor girl. When it comes to white women, the single mother narrative is becoming increasingly positive, but increased acceptance, understanding, and support has yet to be extended to single Black mothers. In discussions on closing the racial opportunity gap, blaming systemic inequities on absent fathers and the inadequacies of present mothers continues to be deemed an acceptable viewpoint across the political spectrum, (<http://aapf.org/black-single-mothers>.) The way Hollywood portrays Black single mothers can be the reason why support isn't extended to them because the world truly believes that they are as demonized as Hollywood portrays them to be.

Abuse

How does the film illustrate the concept of the cycle of abuse? How does Precious break that cycle, and what aspects of her own character enable her to do so?

“Mary showed jealousy, rage, and the worst display of motherhood I’ve ever seen. I wonder if Mary ever loved Precious. The abuse is such a poor representation of how Black single mothers treat their children in real life. Mary made her eat to make her bigger so Carl wouldn’t want to touch her anymore. The idea of Precious even being touched by her father while Mary allows it to happen is heartbreaking. It makes me extremely angry.”

Mary seems to almost hate Precious. Hollywood reiterating this cycle of abuse creates stereotypes that this is how they actually treat their children.

Do you think Precious is as demonized as Mary in this film?

“Hollywood demonized two mothers in this film. Mary is made the most demonized.

The grandmother's character is true. I will assume that she is a black single mother. She

turned a blind eye as she knew precious was being abused and raised her great grandchild (precious' daughter). She left precious and allowed her to be abused and this is how she becomes pregnant with the second baby.”

By stating this she explains how a lot of grandparents in the black community that she knows will mind their business and not butt into their children's drama. This is how toxic generational cycles are created. Whether grandmother's allow the abuse or not her role can create a very negative stigma. Her role can be seen as demonized by Hollywood. This film makes people think that black single mothers allow this to happen to their children. The participant also states that, “Not all fathers molest their kids so this film creates a negative stereotype.” It can be argued that black fathers are demonized in this film.

Conclusions

It's interesting to see that this film was able to be released. Precious' father ends up dying of AIDS, and precious ends up contracting the HIV virus from her father. The storyline is based off of a true story and this is what makes the film an actual horror film. Though, Hollywood exaggerated a lot of the abuse by the mother, the story in general, is heart-breaking. Hollywood can be seen as racist. Many films that involve storylines with black single mothers always depict them in an unnatural and demonizing way. The real issue is that these films have been made and will still be made for many years without any confrontation by black people. The director of the film Precious is a Black man (Lee Daniels). It's interesting to see that one's own people will create such monstrous works of their own people. The reception analysis should show that black single mothers are not as demonized as Precious the film portrays them to be. For future research, a researcher can compare and contrast the film Precious and the film Mommie Dearest.

As both of these films are based on single motherhood. The researcher can compare and contrast how Hollywood portrays the mothers of each film. This is relevant to research because the differences and similarities of depiction of single mothers being portrayed based off social class and race can be seen. After constructing research, it is interesting that there is a sequel related to the film Precious. The author Sapphire created a novel called "The Kid." Instead of the story being based off of Precious, it is based on her son Abdul and the traumas he lives with. Further research can be constructed on this novel to see how children can be affected by generational cycles.

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