

“Oh No She Didn’t!”—No Literally, She Didn’t: Meghan Markle, Kate Middleton, and The Politics of Tears

Sirra Faal

It was the lie heard around the world: Meghan Markle, newcomer to the royal family, had a bridezilla meltdown that sent her soon-to-be sister-in-law Kate Middleton into a fit of tears. Surely, not the best way to earn your spot with your new family. It seems Meghan doesn’t think so either, as she recently sat down for an interview with Oprah in which she clarified that not only was the statement false, but that Kate was actually the one who made *her* cry. Shocking, right? Well, no, not really.

For those with a keen eye for critical media consumption, this was no anomaly, but rather exactly what was to be expected; the press has always been hypercritical of Markle while conversely remaining fairly lenient with Middleton. But the conversation goes beyond these two women. It is not difficult to notice the phenomena in which Black women are routinely scrutinized in the media while their white counterparts are met with empathy and admiration in the same or similar situations. The difference between the media coverage of Meghan Markle and Kate Middleton is exemplary of how stereotypes like the strong Black woman trope, when placed in the context of mainstream white feminism, benefit white women and result in harsh and unfair media coverage for Black women. The difference reveals centuries of history, politics, and prejudice, all wrapped in a single tear.

The original lie first began to make the rounds back in 2018 after being published in a wide array of UK tabloids and newspapers, of which one of the biggest perpetrators was *The Sun*. In an article published in the tabloid, Jack Royston alleged that Meghan “insisted on the very best for her big day,” but when her bridal party fitting “did not go according to her demands” she snapped, leaving the Duchess of Cambridge “shaken and in tears” (Royston). The situation was made worse by the fact that “Kate had only just given birth to her third child...and was feeling quite emotional,” (Royston) a fact which Markle would have been well aware of during her alleged tirade. It wasn’t until a few months later that the story began to circulate in the media, but once it did the reaction to the news was immediate and intense, and it was decidedly anti-Meghan.

This ugly media coverage was nothing new for Markle, who in her brief time of affiliation with the royals had already been painted as a vain, selfish, heartless charlatan sent to corrupt the kingdom’s beloved Prince Harry. Another story published at the time dubbed Markle a “dictatorial bride” who “kicked up a stink” about having to wed in a “musty” old chapel, and yet another article condemned Markle’s taste for her “beloved avocado” which they claimed linked her to “human

rights abuse and drought...illegal deforestation...and all around general environmental devastation” (Hall). The aforementioned *Sun* article shares other tales of Meghan the Menace terrorizing the halls of the palace, including complaints that she “bombards staff with early morning calls and emails,” has made Harry become increasingly petulant, and was so demanding and unreasonable with palace staff that the Queen herself was forced to intervene (Royston). These stories are not unique, and serve to establish a pattern in the media, one in which Markle is outrageous and unreasonable—a villain of sorts. Therefore, it is not surprising that people didn’t question the latest bridal fitting accusations against Meghan.

While *The Sun* falls on the extreme end of the British political spectrum and cannot be used to represent the perception of the entire country, it is a good example of the popular rhetoric being spread around this tale (and around Markle), and how the story was sensationalized. For a while this tale of bridezilla Markle making Middleton cry remained the popular narrative; that is, until March of 2021 when Meghan Markle and Prince Harry joined renowned host and interviewer Oprah Winfrey to clear the air about their exit from the royal family. When asked about the incident Markle said “What was hard to get over was being blamed for something that not only I didn’t do, but that happened to me. The reverse happened...Kate made me cry” (“Meghan Markle Reveals”).

The internet was immediately sent into a flurry, out of which arose the question of why the Royal family refused to release a statement on Meghan’s behalf. Meghan shared that she was also confused about their refusal to come to her defense despite their claims that they supported her, but later realized that they were never going to come to her defense. Perhaps Markle realized that the palace is all about maintaining image, and they work closely with the press to do so. Every good news story needs a spin, and who would ever believe that a strong Black woman like Meghan could be brought to tears by dainty Kate Middleton?



Strong Black Women in the Media, via ‘The Take’ on YouTube

Meghan Markle is a victim of what has been dubbed the “Strong Black Woman” trope, a term used to denote the perception that Black women represent a sort of superwoman archetype. It is conceptualized “through five characteristics: independence, taking care of family and others, hardworking and high achieving, overcoming adversity, and emotionally contained” (Nelson). Picture the hardworking single mom who studied and worked her way out of the ghetto and now toils away to take care of her kids and community, and who does it all without complaint. Or, picture Meghan Markle, raised in a home by a single mother, who overcame her rocky relationship

with her father and half-siblings and worked her way into university, the entertainment industry, and eventually into the Prince's heart ("Meghan Markle Biography"). That's a good thing, right? Who doesn't want to be seen as a superwoman? Some Black women would agree, those who find the role "empowering and freeing" (Nelson). In fact, the trope originated as an attempt to counter other mainstream tropes like the lazy welfare queen, the immoral and hypersexual Jezebel, and the ever-devoted mammy (Nelson). But many Black women reject the role, emphasizing "its problematic and rigid view of strength" (Nelson). They point out how the women who embody the role—women like Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, and Mary Prince—had to be subjected to indescribable trauma before they were allowed to be celebrated. Furthermore, Black women being viewed as abnormally physically and emotionally strong was what allowed people to feel comfortable brutalizing and raping them for centuries (Nelson), and it is what now allows doctors to refuse Black women pain medication, and to disregard the severity of their medical symptoms.

Because the role defines Black women as strong and intimidating, they are perceived as aggressors, hence why it is so easy to paint Markle as the villain in news stories. The trope is why Black women are seen as incapable of being harmed and being fragile, and why it is so unbelievable that Meghan Markle would be on the receiving end of an attack from sweet, innocent Kate Middleton.

What's interesting is that the accusations against Meghan were not just that she made Kate upset, but that she made her cry. This a very critical distinction to make because tears—white tears—hold political power. In her article "White Tears, White Rage: Victimhood and (as) Violence in Mainstream Feminism" researcher Alison Phipps uses the #metoo movement as a lens through which to view white tears and white feminism in the media. In this essay, I will use it to explore how the emotionality of women like Middleton is perceived in the media compared to the treatment that their darker counterparts like Markle receive.

Phipps explains what she calls "strategic white womanhood," meaning that "If anger is the main expression of white power in a masculine register, tears are its feminine equivalent...This 'damsel in distress' evokes a protective response: and simultaneously, colonial archetypes of people of color as aggressive and frightening come into play" (Phipps). Basically, when white women cry people instinctively want to protect them and want to villainize whoever they see as responsible for their tears, often a person of color. This aforementioned "damsel in distress" role is one Meghan could never be cast in and exists as the antithesis of. Seeing a white woman cry has always been able to tug on the collective emotional heartstrings, and over time, both intentionally and unintentionally, white women have been able to manipulate this to their advantage. Think of women like Rose McGowan and Alyssa Milano who after grandiose displays of emotion and tears were hailed as the faces of the #metoo movement (roles which they enthusiastically embraced), despite the fact that Black women like Tarana Burke had been working in the movement for years (Phipps). People didn't tune in to the conversation until white women started crying. Essentially, white women "know how to be victims...how to bleed and weep in the public square. They fundamentally understand that they are entitled to sympathy" (Lemieux qtd. in Phipps). Women like Kate know from experience that for them, a quick tear is all it takes for their sins to be washed away and for somebody to face serious repercussions.

Take for example former British prime minister Theresa May. In 2019 May wept as she resigned from her position in the UK parliament, and, as Phipps pointed out, “These tears did political work...creating amnesia in some quarters” (Phipps). Even though May supported policies that systemically disenfranchised women’s shelters and had been accused of “allowing ‘state-sanctioned’ rape and abuse of vulnerable migrant women at the Yarl’s Wood detention center,” (Phipps) May’s display of waterworks was moving enough that domestic abuse centers posted tweets “thanking May for her service to women and survivors” (Phipps). It was as if the tears suddenly invalidated the years of pain and harm she caused marginalized communities; as if while people were begging the government to wave them the white flag, they were too busy handing Theresa May a white handkerchief. Often, white tears become less a show of vulnerability and more a tool for power.

Phipps asserts that in the current landscape of femininity in the media, “Trauma can be disclosed or ventriloquized to generate further capital in the form of feeling, creating political gain” and that this can be particularly beneficial in “media ‘outrage economies’ that thrive on controversy and scandal” (Phipps). In other words, Phipps believes that tears can be weaponized in the media for further personal gain. In the case of the royal sisters-in-law, the mental image of poor “damsel in distress” Kate working herself into a puddle of tears gained her both sympathy and political power, because it painted her as a victim whom her people needed to rally behind. Strategically, the rumor benefitted her. Perhaps this is why the story (which did not find its way into the press until months after it occurred) was never refuted by palace staff. They knew that in the #metoo media culture of elevating and rallying behind female victims, Kate being cast as a woman wronged could only benefit her, even if these benefits came at Meghan’s expense.

The #metoo movement was hailed as a great moment of bravery and victory for all women in the media. But who did the movement really benefit? It certainly helped women like McGowan, Milano, May, and Middleton. However, as “Black actor and sexual violence activist Gabrielle Union said on *Good Morning America*: ‘I think the floodgates have opened—for white women’” (Union qtd. in Phipps). In other words, the #metoo movement, which is part of a larger media push for female empowerment, is a reminder that there is white feminism, and there is feminism for everybody else. This moment of (white) female empowerment and solidarity comes at the expense of their Black counterparts.

There can be no white feminism without the dehumanization of Black people, just as Kate cannot be cast as a victim without Meghan being cast as a bully. As Phipps asserts, “The cultural power of mainstream white feminism partly derives from the cultural power of white tears. This in turn depends on the dehumanisation of people of colour, who were constructed in colonial ‘race science’ as incapable of complex feeling” (Phipps). Essentially, the tendency to paint white women as angelic comes with the cost of demonizing Black women, and this is why Meghan and other POC women were not surprised that the palace did not come to her defense. They knew that in order to prop Kate up Meghan was always going to have to fall, and the press knew this as well. That is why they made a point to portray the two women differently in situations that were virtually identical. For example, *Daily Mail* published two articles about the women’s pregnancies.

Not long to go! Pregnant Kate tenderly cradles her baby bump while wrapping up her royal duties ahead of maternity leave - and William confirms she's due 'any minute now'

By Siofra Brennan For Mailonline and Rebecca English
Royal Correspondent For The Daily Mail
06:40 EST 21 Mar 2018 , updated 03:43 EST 22 Mar 2018



Why can't Meghan Markle keep her hands off her bump? Experts tackle the question that has got the nation talking: Is it pride, vanity, acting - or a new age bonding technique?

By Mail on Sunday Reporter
18:58 EST 26 Jan 2019 , updated 11:45 EST 28 Jan 2019



The first is titled “Not long to go! Pregnant Kate tenderly cradles her baby bump while wrapping up her royal duties ahead of maternity leave” and showed a picture of Kate with her hands on her bump. It contained the quote: “Bumping along nicely! The Duchess was seen placing a protective hand on her tummy as she exited the event” (Hall). Sweet article, right? Kate is painted as tender, maternal, and loving, and the audience is encouraged to share in her excitement about the baby. The second article is titled “Why can’t Meghan Markle keep her hands off her bump? Experts tackle the question that has got the nation talking: Is it pride, vanity, acting, or a new age bonding technique?” and also showed a picture of Meghan with her hands on her bump. It contained the quote: “Personally, I find the cradling a bit like those signs in the back of cars: Baby on Board. Virtue signaling, as though the rest of us barren harridans deserve to burn alive in our cars” (Hall). So, to clarify, when Middleton cradles her bump she is a sweet, loving mother-to-be, and when Markle does it, she is vain and showboating, and implying that her child is more important than everybody else’s. Similarly, *The Sun* published articles back to back in which they commended William and Kate for talking about vulnerability and abandoning the stiff upper lip policy but bemoaned Harry and Meghan for doing the same, saying they were fragile and spoiled, and claiming that they were recklessly doing away with yet another tradition (Hall). The examples continue to abound and show that like clockwork, every time Kate is uplifted Meghan is torn down.

The current dynamic between media portrayals of white femininity and Black femininity is merely a modern-day ramification of centuries worth of white feminism. Colonialism created “a circuit between bourgeois white women’s tears and white men’s rage, often activated by allegations of rape, which operated in the service of economic extraction and exploitation. This circuit endures” (Phipps). We see this circuit enduring in the stories of men—and boys—like Emmet Till, stories in which the cries of a white woman, the mere thought of her innocence being violated, was enough to condemn them to death without proof. Going even further back we see this in how Susan B. Anthony, historically the pinnacle of all things feminism, was willing to leave behind women of color in her fight so that she could get to where she wanted to be. Today, we see this in how the #metoo era of feminism is willing to silence Black voices in order to amplify white ones.

White feminism and its movements have always excluded Black women and have never come to their defense in issues of sexism and misogyny. For instance, examine the treatment of aforementioned actress Gabrielle Union. When the #metoo movement sprung to life she was a vocal advocate for the cause and once again shared her story of being subjected to sexual violence at gunpoint when she was nineteen years old (Pelletiere). She was not greeted with nearly the same respect and empathy as her white counterparts; rather, she was largely dismissed and disrespected. Similarly, while people were eager to come to Kate’s defense when they thought she had been wronged, they were not nearly as quick to do the same for Meghan when the truth came out, and in fact were openly hostile to Meghan sharing her story. Yes, it is true that when women speak out there is almost always severe backlash, but women are not a monolith; therefore, said backlash is not monolithic.

So what type of backlash did Meghan receive? In the interview, Markle reveals how she was regularly called racial slurs, and how she was bullied by the press and media to the point that she considered suicide. But this is not to say that Kate was never on the receiving end of less than favorable media coverage. Due to the extended period of time in which Kate was content waiting for William to propose to her, she was dubbed “Waity Katie,” (Hearon) a phrase (with notably sexist undertones) that implied that she was just a woman who was sitting around waiting for a man to give her a ring. Middleton has shared that she also had a hard time dealing with and confronting this.

As researcher Julia Gillard points out, “Laboratory-based research has demonstrated that confronting sexism does lead to predominantly negative perceptions of the women who do so” (Gillard) and there is a large social cost for women who choose to confront their perpetrators. In fact, Julia Gillard shares that a lot of women are reluctant or even scared to confront sexism because they don’t think they’ll be taken seriously, especially not when issues like racism are taken so much more seriously (Gillard). We can’t downplay all that Kate went through, right?

To this, I would respond with the words of African American writer, scholar, and political activist Pearl Cleage. Reflecting on the Yoko Ono quote that “woman is the n***** of the world” in her essay “Basic Training,” Cleage calls it “offensively interesting,” going on to say “Who was she talking to? The question assumes that one cannot be a female and a ‘n*****’ at the same time. Where does that leave black women? Maybe that makes us the n*****-n***** of the world. The

mind boggles at the kind of oppression that would await such a cursed being” (Cleage). In essence, Cleage argues that the conversation of sexism and misogyny is not monolithic and that the race-based oppression women of color face must be considered in tandem with gender-based oppression. Gillard’s argument unconsciously focuses on white women while ignoring the fact that some women combat not just misogyny and not just racism, but the intersection between the two. If white women are scared to confront their oppressors, imagine how it must feel for Black women. Kate may have been on the receiving end of unflattering and unkind comments meant to attack her womanhood, but as Meghan herself said, “Mean is not the same as racist,” (Markle qtd. in Hearon) and as Cleage teaches us, some women have to deal not just with attacks on their womanhood, but attacks on their *Black* womanhood. This special kind of vitriol reserved for Black women is something Middleton and other white women will never have to go through.



Markle and her mother, Doria Ragland

It is at this point that I’d like to mention that in any other situation—if Meghan wasn’t as famous as she was, or if the public had not seen so many pictures of Meghan’s unequivocally Black mother—Meghan would be a white-passing woman. Markle herself knows this, and in the Oprah interview was careful to never refer to herself as Black, but only as “a woman of color.” She also would have been well aware of the history of racism and imperialism intrinsic to the royal family, and of what her joining this institution represented. Markle, who is light-skinned with European features, straight long hair, and an upper-class socioeconomic background, is the most “acceptable” Black woman Harry could have chosen. Due to structures like colorism (preference within a race for individuals with lighter skin), texturism (preference for looser curl patterns or straight hair), and featurism (preference for eurocentric features) within the Black community, Markle is elevated to the highest level of privilege and does not face much of the stigma that her darker, more afro-centric counterparts face. Even with all that, it did not matter to the royals and to the public. One can only imagine how severely critical reception would change if Meghan was any other Black woman.

The takeaway here is that any way the story is spun, people are eager to turn Meghan into the villain, and that this is due to tropes like the Strong Black woman role and conventional white mainstream feminism that can only be maintained by excluding and dehumanizing Black folks.

The overlap of these two structures makes it so that the tears and emotionality of a white woman are worth ten times those of her Black counterparts.

It has been said that if we cannot name our suffering, then we cannot begin to confront it. What Markle experienced was an attack on not just her womanhood, but also on her race. In “Basic Training,” Pearl Cleage explains that racism and sexism are fundamentally linked and that they are “Systems of oppression designed to control, confine, and exploit one group of people for the benefit of another” (Cleage). This is akin to what Queer Black feminist Moya Bailey named misogynoir; that is, “the unique anti-Black racist misogyny that Black women experience” (Bailey). Black women in the media like Markle and others experience misogynoir at heightened levels. One proposed method of understanding and combating this racist misogyny is scholar Kimberle Crenshaw’s intersectionality, a framework that insists that we must take into account all the different intersections of oppression in conjunction, not separately. Such a framework would put a name to the unique backlash Meghan Markle received and would allow audiences to look at media representations of Black women and women of color with the proper nuance required.

So at the end of the day, it was all a lie. Or it wasn’t. Kate made Meghan cry. Or she didn’t—to be honest, the specifics of the story don’t really matter all that much. But, for the record, I’m team Meghan.

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