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Silencing the Sista: A look at the Angry Black Woman

Admit it. I am sure you've seen her or have heard of her. She's a loud, black, sassy, neck bopping, finger snapping, gum chewing, hand on hip, eye rolling woman. She's liable to cuss you out a time or two and you better not cross her. I know her as a mama, sister, Auntie, cousin, grandma and 'nem. But I am sure you know her as the: angry black woman.

The sapphire or the angry black woman we recognize today has been baking for over 241 years. Made with a pinch of racism and sautéed in sass we can thank the show *Amos 'n' Andy* for cooking her up. The two white men minstrel show of the 1930s made its claim to fame in stereotyping the African-American community, especially the women. In an article about the show and its effect Dr. David Pilgrim, a professor of Sociology at Ferris State University noted she was to be seen as a “shrill nagger with irrational states of anger and indignation and is often mean-spirited and abusive. Although African American men are her primary targets, she has venom for anyone who insults or disrespects her. The Sapphire's desire to dominate and her hyper-sensitivity to injustices make her a perpetual complainer, but she does not criticize to improve things; rather, she criticizes because she is unendingly bitter and wishes that unhappiness on others.” It was that sense of nagging - that sense of disrespect and bitterness in the character named Sapphire that would be remembered most. It wasn't just about how she was acting but how she was *behaving* based on the color of her skin. It was like it was in her DNA to

be a sassy sista - or at least that's what the show creators Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll thought. And if they thought it - so did White America. After all, it was the 30's.

The idea of the Sapphire character made its way and manifested into the 21st century. Traces of her and her mannerisms were being picked up all over Hollywood. It took nothing for actresses to pick up the costume of sorts and wear it about. So long were the days of *The Cosby Shows* Clair Huxtable or *Fresh Prince of Bel Air's* Vivian Banks. Those images of black women didn't sell. No one wanted to see ordinary. Viewers wanted to see extraordinary and boy did they get EXTRA. Click on the cable and you could see a formation of this trope. It was hard to escape it. Taraji P. Henson's character of Cookie in *Empire*; Jill Scott's Angela in *Why Did I Get Married*; Viola Davis Annalise Keating in *How to Get Away with Murder*; Tichina Arnolds Rochelle in *Everybody Hate's Chris*. The list goes on and on. These characters were a continuation of what was already started a century ago and it was beginning to be a reflection in the mirror to some black women. Directors and writers continued to write and produce these stereotypical characters that started creating a single narrative that limits how black women live and succeed, and negatively influences viewers perception of all black women.

Media pundits and personalities alike also gravitated to this trope. If TV said it and showed it, so could everyone else. During a 2008 segment of *FOX News Watch*, Cal Thomas an American syndicated columnist, author, radio commentator, and American University grad chimed in during the discussion about black women and the soon to be First Lady. He stated "Look at the image of the angry black women on television. Politically you have Maxine Waters of California, liberal Democrat. She's always angry every time she gets on television. Cynthia McKinney, another angry black woman. And who are the black women you see on the local news at night in cities all over the country. They're usually angry about something. They've had

a son who has been shot in a drive-by shooting. They are angry at Bush. So you don't really have a profile of non-angry black women." It was that profile of the non-angry black women that people A) weren't looking to find and B) already knew/thought didn't exist - so why try? So when it came to the age of *Real TV* or reality TV and to show the angry black woman in her full bravado wasn't something that was questioned. It was most certainly on the forecast and it was certainly going to rain (or hail) angry black women. Even Stevie Wonder could see it coming a mile away.

What people didn't see though was this tornado that would take TV by storm. Take *Real Housewives of Atlanta (RHOA)* for example. Though the ladies of this franchise act the same in comparison to other *Real Housewives* such as New York (*RHONY*) or Orange County (*RHOC*) they're labeled as the take no mess - put up with no mess angry black women of Atlanta. During the Season Six Reunion this was evident when cast members Porsha Williams and Kenya Moore had it all out in an on-screen brawl. What started with Kenya's use of an actual megaphone to name call and Porsha's clapback of insults ended with both ladies being escorted out. What was replayed was this episode - what became repeated was the terms "You are a dumb hoe – shut up" and "I'll fuck you up" but what wasn't represented was some of the "normal" moments or less racially motivated scenes that occurred in that season.

The similar narrative displayed was featured in another Bravo show, *Married to Medicine*. The seven cast member show made up of 3 women who are doctors and the rest of the women whom are married to doctors aired another variation of the angry black woman: the professional, but unprofessional sista. During an episode in season one, Mariah and Torah engaged in a throw down at a birthday celebration for Mariah and Kari's husband. After the punches were made and the "shots" were fired, it was then when the producers felt compelled to

break up the fight. The cat fight of sorts resulted in Mariah being the one kicked out of the party even though it was her husband's birthday.

With every show like *Real Housewives of Atlanta* or *Married to Medicine* they all turn into watchable, enjoyable TV. No episode or season or even pilot is aired without someone seeming bad, bitchy, and boujee, a mixture quite like no other. Even the doctors - all college graduates weren't subject from this label - and that's where things begin to turn awry. The roller coaster begins to ricochet. Instead of seeing the black woman who works and parents, viewers see the angry black woman.

It become problematic not only for those watching but also those apart. Shaunie O'Neal, former wife of NBA star Shaquille O'Neal and the executive producer and star of the VH1 reality show *Basketball Wives* noted at the ESSENCE music festival in 2011 how it isn't an issue of what's aired. At the end of the day she knows that it's just television, but "the problem (for her) is when black women are portrayed as only being that way and labeled different than their non-black counterparts for the same type of behavior. That's when it becomes negative and damaging to our image." It's the small screen experiences that could depict the similar experiences and commonalities of both black and whites, but they aren't. Whether *RHOA* or *Married to Medicine*, the viewers don't see the black mom taking the kids to school, don't see the black mom doing her motherly duties, or don't see the black doctors doing what they've been educated to do.

It wasn't just O'Neal who knew that this was damaging. In an article featured in *The Root* Arisha Hatch, the managing director of campaigns at ColorOfChange.org, the country's largest online civil rights organization agreed with O'Neal. "Negative perceptions - conscious and subconscious - manifest in ways that have a profound impact on black lives, including less

attention from doctors and teachers, reduced employment opportunities, harsher sentences in courtrooms and abusive treatment by police” (Hatch). The perceptions mentioned not only begins to create a trickle down effect that goes with promoting and publishing ratchet TV, but also begins to make things hard on what’s real and what’s fake.

Even young black girls seem to struggle with this differentiation. In a study on “Debunking the Myth of the ‘Angry Black Woman’: An Exploration of Anger in Young African American Women.” Dr. J. Celeste Walley-Jean, an Associate Professor of Psychology and Director of Integrative Studies, found that the young girls in her focus groups often would categorize black characters on TV as loud and rude. When asked of what characters they trusted names such as *Hannah Montana* would be given in comparison to *The Game’s Tasha Mack*. There’s obviously a difference between the football mom and the country singer, but the difference even for the young girls correlate with trust, and if people can’t trust you in the comfort of their living rooms, they certainly can’t trust you or people who look/act like you in real life. So when people can’t tell the difference between what’s art and what’s life, it’s the black women who are always the ones who walk away empty handed.

What people have to understand though is that when these sisters are angry (in real life or reality TV) they just happen to be black AND angry. Just like if they were white AND angry, but just a little darker. It isn’t just black women who get angry, it’s all women and it’s ALL people matter-of-factly who get angry. During a National Women’s Studies Association Conference in 1981 artist, activist, and poet Audre Lorde addressed her audience on this particular topic. “Every woman has a well-stocked arsenal of anger potentially useful against those oppressions, personal and institutional, which brought that anger into being. Focused with precision it can become a powerful source of energy serving progress and change. And when I speak of change, I

do not mean a simple switch of positions or a temporary lessening of tensions, nor the ability to smile or feel good. I am speaking of a basic and racial alteration in those assumptions underlining our lives” (Lorde). The anger that is within black women didn’t magically appear. It’s rooted. It’s grounded in a lot of things. Lorde mentions a concept of change. And that change or direction toward it is what’s needed with this narrative.

However, change isn’t always easy, especially with black women. It’s quite unbearable that black women are always having to be seen angry or being known as the angry one. They have 99 problems but being angry isn’t always one. It hurts and dehumanizes them. And sometimes when they are angry it’s certified, justified, and bonafide. Just look at history and we see black women being angry for the RIGHT reasons and doing the right thing. When Harriet Tubman was angry she freed her people. When Rosa Parks was angry she refused to get up. And even now when the black women were angry about Trayvon Martin, Ferguson, and police brutality they started a national movement of what now is known as Black Lives Matters. It’s all channeled anger. It’s all controlled. However, for the most part that channeled and controlled anger is what can create a sense of fear. There’s a fear from the outside of how *angry* can they angry black woman be and then there’s this fear from black women on how she will be perceived if she is always angry 24/7. Everyone can’t be a Tubman or a Parks but where do you draw the line?

Black girls are taught from a young age about code switching. They start the process of learning when to turn it on and when to turn it off, like an internal light switch. They learn in their homes and the churches on how to be quiet. How to be seen as the nice girl, the token one, the “Oreo”. How to act like the “Becky with the good hair”. That in order to ever be accepted and welcomed they better first learn some respectability politics. It’s the only way to be

respected. They have to learn that if they want to work (or be respected at work) they have to keep this in mind. In a research study in Essence Magazine by Added Value Cheskin, consultants found more than “70 percent of the 650 African-American women we surveyed fear being labeled an Angry Black Woman by their coworkers” (Holmes). It becomes a common knowledge that Aretha Franklin’s song R-E-S-P-E-C-T won’t happen until the inner Shanika’s and Shericka’s are silenced so that they too won’t seem loud and ghetto - and that if it ever comes out it maybe death.

This idea that the Angry Black Woman could be put in her coffin came with Sandra Bland in 2015. A black sister from Chicago living in Texas trying to make a living and trying to do right by coming back to her alma mater to work. I am sure she too was sat down at once. I am sure she was given the same lecture about how to conduct herself. How to go about business. What to say. What not to say. To always be cautious of her tone. The similar conversations my grandmother had with my mother and that my mother has had with my two sisters. I am sure all of that was checked. The problem though was that hot day in July 2015 she had an episode. She snapped. She forgot how she “was supposed to act” and so she paid the price: she died. By refusing to get out the car, by refusing to stop smoking her cigarette, and by refusing to “cooperate” with the officer she ended up dead in her cell three days later. Though the cause of her “suicide” and what transpired while in jail is still unclear the fact that the officer saw her essentially as another “angry black woman” IS clear. Because of his perception, she did the time for that “crime,” and that’s the fear of many black females.

It seems that there’s two choices. And if you’re a black female you want the first option to not die. But even if you have the first option you still might face the Angry Black Woman syndrome. Even the former First Lady, Michelle Obama an ivy league graduate, couldn’t escape

it. In a 2016 farewell interview with Oprah the then FLOTUS talked about being judged as the angry black woman by people who didn't even know her. She shared the heart but also how she had to work to change that narrative from her name. She couldn't go and plagiarize like Melania Trump. Or she couldn't just work on Children's Literacy like Laura, but she had to constantly prove that she was educated, that she had tack, and that there had to be a smile on her face always even when a country not only hated her but hated her husband, family, and the fact they were living in the people's house. Imagine enduring all that plus some for eight years while slaying, serving looks, and being a role model for girls on the daily - but she did. Similar stories like Michelle's have been echoed by women all across the country.

So it's simple. Yes, we know that black women can be a handful, I know the one's in my life are. But if we want to scream #BlackGirlMagic and if we want to appreciate the Beyoncé's, the Oprah's and the Michelle's we have to appreciate the black girls in all shapes and sizes and all emotional states. We have to realize that it's up to us in our encounter and what we watch. It's time out for black women having to become a cultural chameleon. We have to know that they aren't always angry and when they are that it could come from a true place. We have to a do viewer reality check. It's not binary thinking. It's not all black girls are angry or they're not. It's sometimes they're happy, sometimes they're sad, and sometimes they're angry. Or all three. It's not a this or that - or a binary way of numbering them. When trying to think that binary way one often overlooks the environmental factors that most blacks grow up in. From young adolescents to fully developed ladies the community in which they grow up in expects them to be tougher than most. Many experience neglect, poverty, or the help of the government thus making the fear that they have to make it constantly from one day to the next. This stigma won't go away with a poof of a magic wand. The fairy god mother won't come and make every person in America

erase the narrative that all black women are angry or mad, but rather it starts with you. Everyone must become educated. There's a need to become *woke*. Watch movies like *Hidden Figures* and shows like *Black-ish* that show all facets of black women in their bad and boujee elements. Revisit some of the olden shows like *Fresh Prince of Bel Air* and *The Cosby Show* (even though they don't have nearly the drama). Set the tabloids down. DVR the reality television shows. Come back to them every now and then but know that just like me, you, black women are multidimensional and every single way. What is REAL isn't what's REALity

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