
Research Papers



The Jezebel Stereotype in August Wilson Play “Ma Rainey's Black Bottom”

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Abstract

Ma Rainey's Black Bottom is a 1982 play - one of the ten-play [Pittsburgh Cycle](#) by , a [Pulitzer Prize-winning American playwright](#) - that chronicles the twentieth century African American experience.¹ August Wilson is a contemporary African American playwright who has radically influenced the development of African American dramatic tradition. Wilsons' female characters represent his perception and conception of art and on expression of African-American culture. However, the women in Wilson's plays commonly do not play dominant roles. In fact, they are unusually outnumbered by the men, as there may be only one woman amongst a cast of several men.

Perhaps the most prominent of Wilson's female character is Ma Rainey of Ma Rainey's Black Bottom. Accordingly, August Wilson depicts the tense diplomacy struck inside a recording studio between a white production company and the black artists whose music will make the company millions. In addition, the jezebel image which came to signify a deceitful and immoral woman of the play is depicted through Ma Rainey who is black woman, 50s; vocalist. The portrayal of Black women as [licentious](#) by nature is an enduring stereotype. The descriptive words associated with this stereotype are singular in their focus: seductive, alluring, worldly, beguiling, tempting, and lewd. Historically, White women, as a category, were portrayed as models of self-respect, self-control, and modesty – even sexual purity, but Black women were often portrayed as innately promiscuous, even predatory. This depiction of Black women is signified by the name Jezebel. ²

In order to understand the image of jezebel stereotype, we must take a careful look of black womanhood – in particular the negative images. Collins states:

Portraying African American woman as stereotypical mummies, matriarchs, welfare recipients and hot mommas has been essential to the political economy of domination fostering Black women's oppression challenging these controlling images has long been a core theme in black feminist thought .As part of a generalized ideology of domination, these controlling images of Black womanhood take on special meaning because the authority to define these symbol is a major instrument of power.[...]These controlling images are designed to make racism; sexism and poverty appear natural, normal and inevitable part of everyday life.³

Depicted on white stages, black characters often fit into stereotypical characters that would haunt American stages for decades to come. Some of the most prevalent of those were the Sambo, the

Uncle Tom, the Mammy and the Jezebel. These racist depictions would be reflected over and over again in the theater, usually performed by white actors in blackface. The image of the black woman as jezebel's function is to relegate all black women to the category of sexually aggressive women. The jezebel image makes the black woman dangerous because she appears capable of undermining the patriarchal notions of family. Her self sufficiency makes it seem that her only need must be sexual. Lisa M. Anderson discusses the jezebel image:

"She also envisioned as a destroyer of black man and manhood which she accomplishes by pulling black men down from their "proper" role as patriarch within the family. [...] Jezebel's theatre is not restricted to the larger structure of family and nation. She can also independently be the source of destruction of her and of the men who become involved with her"⁴

The jezebel image represents dangerous sex. The negative image connotes that the male victim who falls into her clutches brings about his own downfall. Ma Rainey is one of Wilson's fiercest independent women. She remains independent throughout the drama. From the moment she enters the stage, she is a woman in control, and she understands how and when to use her power. Kim Marra places Ma within the image of the emasculating black matriarch. She feels Wilson has created a caricature of a black woman whose physique marks her as an anti-type of desirable femininity. Marra writes about Ma and jezebel image:

"However, incarnating an opposite of idealized bourgeois WASP womanhood also enables the white studio executives to exploit and degrade her. Seeing herself as their whore and playing the role for all she can get, Ma becomes complicit in this process. She knows that as soon as she gives them what they want, which ultimately she will. "they roll over and put their pants on." When she lies down with the white man, she ingests the poison of his oppression and then passes it on to the "family" of her back-up band over which she rules with an iron hand."⁵

In relation to black manhood, negative connotations have accrued to African American mothers through the black mammy stereotype. Originating in the slavery era, the faithful, obedient servant was prized in white families because she was deemed sexually undesirable to the patriarch and a safe, self-sacrificing nurturer of his children, one who could do the "dirty work" of child rearing the dignity of the WASP wife. Collins

elaborated:

"By loving, nurturing, and caring for her white children and 'family' better than her own, the mammy symbolizes the dominant group's perceptions of ideal Black female relationship to elite male power."⁶

Wilson clearly illustrate the role of Ma Rainey as the dominant force in her own musical group, instead of being subjugated to a weak and confined position as simply a singer with a band. As leader of her own band, Ma broke down the walls of the traditional positioning of women within the blues industry. With her lyrical content, the real Ma Rainey's stylistic flair and performance countered conventional depiction of black female sexuality. She moved beyond the stereotypical images of the black female as black whore or sexual black mammy. She recorded songs that instructed women to fight back against oppressive men in their lives.

In the play, Ma takes control over the form and content of her song and by doing so, she maintains control over her sexuality. In her personal life, again, the real Ma Rainey did not conform to traditional gender expectations. She was a bisexual with acknowledged lesbian relationships. Wilson picks up on Ma's sexuality, and this is how we get the character of Dussie Mae. Culter alludes Dussie Mae as "Ma's girl" and warns Levee to leave her alone. Marra criticizes Wilson's characterization of Dussie Mae for falling prey to the jezebel image. She writes. "Dressed like a Jezebel, Dussie Mae, the only other female character in the play, is reduced to an opportunistic pawn in Levee's futile struggle with Ma to Prove his manhood."⁷ Dussie Mae talks with Levee:

Levee: That's what I was trying to tell you last night. A man what's gonna get his own band need to have a woman like you.

Dussie Mae: A woman like me wants somebody to bring it and put it in my hand. I don't need nobody wanna get something for nothing and leave me standing in my door.⁸

Dussie Mae wants to survive on her own, but she lacks the talent and "know-how" of Ma. She clings to any opportunity that will elevate her status. When Levee makes sexual advances toward her, Dussie Mae embraces the chance to fill some of the gaps in her empty life. Despite her pretense, she finally surrenders to Levee, and the two share a passionate kiss.

The image here does uphold the jezebel image of the black woman as described by Lisa M.

Anderson: "... the jezebel represents dangerous sex; falling prey to her charms means trouble to her and her male victim. Usually, the man's inability to resist her brings about her downfall as well as his." 9 Dussie Mae's behavior does presents a serious problem for Levee. Levee uses Dussie as a pawn in his conflict with Ma. For Levee, messing with Ma's lover is a challenge to Ma's supremacy. For Dussie Mae, her actions could destroy her financial stability, for Ma has given her money and clothes.

Although Ma Rainey is a strong, defiant, and independent female character, she still reveals the care-taker side of her womanhood. She is a brilliant mixture of fierce independence and their strength on the one hand yet humane and sympathetic compassion on the other. Ma reveals that she is just as vulnerable as any black woman of her day who challenges the traditional role of black womanhood and status quo. Her relationship with her nephew, Sylvester, exposes the maternal and nurturing side of her womanhood. She refuses to record "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom" unless her nephew Sylvester speaks the opening dialogue. Ma said to her nephew, "Come on Sylvester. You just stand here and hold your hands like I told you. Just remember the words and say them... that's all there is to it. Don't worry about messing up. If you mess up, we'll do it again." 10

To sum up, the Jezebel has replaced the Mammy as the dominant image of Black women in American popular culture. The Black woman as prostitute, for example, is a staple in mainstream movies, especially those with urban settings. The Black prostitute and the Black pimp supposedly give these movies cutting edge realism. Small budget pornographic movies reinforce vile sexual stereotypes of Black women. These women are willing, sometimes predatory, sexual deviants who will fulfill any and all sexual fantasies. Their sexual performances tap into centuries-old images of Black women as uninhibited whores. A half century after the American civil rights movement, it is increasingly easy to find Black women, especially young ones, depicted as Jezebels whose only value is as sexual commodities.

NOTES

1. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ma_Rainey%27s_Black_Bottom

2. <http://www.ferris.edu/jimcrow/jezebel/>

3. Collins, Patricia Hill. Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and Politics

of Empowerment. New York: Routledge, 1991. P. 67-68.

4. M. Anderson Lisa, *Mammies No More: The Changing Image of Black Women on Stage and Screen*, Rowman and Littlefield Press. 1997. P.xxvii

5. Kim Marra, *Ma Rainey and Boyz: Gender Ideology in August Wilson's Broadway Cannon*, August Wilson: A Casebook. Ed. Marily Elkins. New York: Garland, 1994, P. 144.

6. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the politics of Empowerment*, London, New York : Routledge, 1991, P-70.

7. Ibid., Kim Marra P. 142

8. August Wilson. *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*. In *Black Thunder. An Anthology of Contemporary African American Drama*, Ed. and Introd. William B. Brach. New York: Penguin, 1992. P. 81.

9. Ibid., P. 75.