

African Jezebel: Myth Formation and Stereotypes of Black Female Promiscuity within the Context of the Colonial Caribbean Islands

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*Does my sexiness upset you?
Does it come as a surprise,
That I dance like I've got diamonds
At the meeting of my thighs?*
~ Maya Angelou, "Still I Rise"

For many scholars of women's studies and Caribbean history, the notion of the African Jezebel has become a subject of long and heated dialogue. As a result, the divergent arguments have taken their forms, shaping and reshaping the individual and collective scholarly understanding of the subject matter. Within these divergent and sometimes undefined discourses, the misinterpretation of written information, combined with the predetermined notion about the character of African females, makes it difficult to achieve a unanimous consensus regarding the underlying causes of the formation of the African Jezebel myth.¹ Whereas early historical writings and scholarly discourses on the causes behind the myth of *hyper-sexual* and *immoral* African female behavior focused primarily on the Europeans misunderstanding of the diverse African socio-cultural backgrounds, careful analysis of the primary and secondary sources suggests the political and the socio-economic genesis of the African Jezebel myth.

To endeavor a description of black women's promiscuity is to proceed with difficulty through divergent primary and secondary literature

¹ Jezebel is a biblical character. She was a princess and wife of the King Ahab. According to the account in I and II Kings, she pressed the cult of Baal on the Israelites. Jezebel is often associated with the stereotype of women's promiscuity and sexual seduction.

that represent valuable sources of historical background. Thus, to understand the historical context of this stereotype better, one must present and analyze the impact of European preconception on the patterns of later African Jezebel mythology. The genesis of this phenomenon starts with the early European explorations of Africa. Travelers' encounters with new and unknown African cultures, wherein the African women's nakedness represented the norm rather than deviance, created an immense cognitive confusion among European explorers.² As historian Barbara Bush has eloquently put it, those travelers drew "the equation between lack of modesty of black women and lack of sexual morality," inadvertently planting the seed of a cultural bias.³

One of the earliest accounts of European encounter with African cultures was presented in Richard Hakluyt's collection of English voyages to unknown lands, in which he described the first Europeans' impression of the Benin people, as he lucidly noted: "The people are very gentle and loving, and they goe naked both men and women vntill they be married, and then they goe covered from the middle downe to the knees."⁴ Historian Jennifer L. Morgan, in her book *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery*, further rehearsed this argument as she noted that the first narratives disseminated in Europe "provided a corpus from which subsequent writers borrowed freely...the images of...African women that resonated with readers."⁵ What these two authors underlined was that the image of African woman's nakedness, which of course was incompatible with Christian doctrines, contributed profoundly to the impression of her *immorality* and *licentiousness*. As a result, the old rhetoric of the European socio-sexual deviance found its new connotation in relation to African females. Morgan has noted that the 1602 translation of Pieter de Marees's *A description and historicall declaration of the golden Kingdome of Guinea* juxtaposed African women's behavior with savagery, consequently associating it with her "unrestricted sexuality."⁶ One much lamented development that came into place from this perceived association was that

² To retain the authentic character of the historical sources, all the subsequent quotations from the older sources will be presented in the original forms as they were written by the authors/publishers.

³ Barbara Bush, *Slave Women in Caribbean Society: 1650-1838* (London: James Currey Ltd., 1990), 14.

⁴ Richard Hakluyt, *Principal Navigations, Voyages, Traffiques and Discoveries of the English Nation Collected by Richard Hakluyt Preacher, and sometime Student of Christ-Church in Oxford and Edited by Edmund Goldsmid, F.R.H.S. VOLUME XI AFRICA*, (London: George Bishop and Ralph Newberrie, 1585), Chapter 60, <http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/h/hakluyt/voyages/v11/>

⁵ Jennifer L. Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 15.

⁶ Ibid., 30.

by shifting the argument, the contemporary authors introduced a new paradigm into the historical narration, wherein the women with their sexual desires became associated with beasts. In 1735 John Atkins, in his work *A Voyage, to Guinea, Brasil, and the West Indies*, vividly linked the African women with the animal as he wrote:

When the Nakednes, Poverty and Ignorance of thefe Species of Men are confidered; it would incline one to think it a bettering their Condition, to tranport them to the wort of Chriftian Slavery; but as we find them little mended in thofe refpects at the Weft-Indies, their Patrons refpecting them only as Beafts of Burthen.⁷

Hence, to an eighteenth-century audience, the comparison of the black female to a beast of burden not only manipulated and distorted African women's sexuality but it can also be argued that it reassigned her social status to a beastly existence. As Atkins has noted, the dissemination of charging African women with bestiality further propagated the stereotype of "her ignorance and stupidity to guide or control lust."⁸ Edward Long has presented a similar argument in his book *The History of Jamaica*, published in 1774, wherein the author attempted to underline the black women's bestiality by alleging "orangutans possessed some kind of passionate fond for women."⁹

Although these non-natural impressions and interpretations made by the first explorers intensely influenced the formation of the African woman stereotype, other factors continued to shape the public perception as well. One of the prominent factors that contributed to this situation was the consistent misunderstanding of African cultures, especially the system of kinship and, directly related to it the institution of polygamy. Kinship was an inherent part of many African cultures and was often prescribed by the local conventions. However, the process of the kinship formation was not understood by Europeans, and often resulted in false impressions regarding the sexuality of African women. Although not directly related to the field of Caribbean history, historian James H. Sweet in his study made a valid point

⁷ John Atkins, *A Voyage to Guines, Brasil, and the West Indies* (London: C. Ward and R. Chandler, 1735), 62, under Open Library.

http://openlibrary.org/books/OL6957763M/A_voyage_to_Guinea_Brasil_and_the_West_Indies (accessed December 12, 2012).

⁸ Ibid., 108; see also Jenifer L. Morgan, *Laboring Women*, 41.

⁹ Edward Long, *The History of Jamaica or, General Survey of the ancient and modern state of the island: with reflections on its situations settlements, inhabitants, climate, products, commerce, laws, and government...* (London, England: T. Lawnuades, 1774), 359, under Open Library
http://openlibrary.org/books/OL17939066M/The_history_of_Jamaica, (accessed December 12, 2012).

accentuating this cultural misunderstanding. First he underlined that many African societies celebrated sexual freedom, which of course was contradictory to European “moral, cultural, and religious standards,” and secondly, he juxtaposed the practice of having children out of wedlock with complete lack of understanding of the European concept of a “legitimate child.”¹⁰ The significance of his argument lays in the notion that this cultural misconstruction had created an additional fallacy of the role of women within African societies, consequently perpetuating the false image of their lustfulness and promiscuousness.

The structure of local ties among different families and ties among divergent tribes allowed Africans to build reciprocal relations by intermarrying. Women often found themselves married into a family as one of many wives living within the polygamist structure. The concept of polygamy for Europeans was unacceptable due to the Christian values they practiced. Historian Deborah Gray White has emphasized, “[polygamy] was interpreted as uncontrolled lust [whereas even] tribal dances were reduced to the level of orgy.”¹¹ Building on Gray White’s argument, historian Barbara Bush extended the definition of polygamy as a “system that was fostering not only immorality but rather amorality.”¹² One could argue that in doing so, she reinforced the derogatory connotation of black females’ promiscuity supporting the argument of the European inability to understand and recognize the true nature of African females’ familiar and intimate relations.

Another cultural misinterpretation that contributed profoundly to this stereotype of the African Jezebel was the myth of black women’s pain-free reproduction. The cultural legacy of birth with its notion of women being able to deliver babies “with little or no pain” and their “proclivities to till the soil- birth the child,” again connected women with the beast and at this same time with her unrestricted sexuality.¹³ Attention to African women’s procreative capacities was also underlined by Gray White, who has suggested that it gave “credence to the reality of Jezebel,” whereas she elucidated “once reproduction became a topic of public conversations, so did the slave female’s sexual activities.”¹⁴ As a result, metaphors for black women depicting them as “breeders” became common in Caribbean societies. Trevor Burnard in his book *Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire*, quite

¹⁰ James H. Sweet, *Recreating Africa: Culture, Kinship, and Religion in the African –Portuguese World, 1441-1740* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 36-37.

¹¹ Deborah Gray White, *Arn’t I a Woman?* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1985), 29.

¹² Barbara Bush, *Slave Women in Caribbean Society*, 84.

¹³ Jennifer L. Morgan, *Laboring Women*, 47.

¹⁴ Deborah Gray White, *Arn’t I a Woman?*, 31.

eloquently underlined that the slave women in Jamaica “were both producers and reproducers.”¹⁵

However, the emphasis on women’s reproduction created an interesting phenomenon as over worked slave women resisted overbearing pregnancies by extended weaning of their infant children, an old African practice. According to Barbara Bush-Slimani, “the psychological resistance to child bearing [and] procuring abortions” was construed by Caribbean planters as another sign of promiscuity.¹⁶ An interesting and thought-provoking argument was made by Marietta Morrissey, a professor of American Studies at Purdue University, who pointed out that “as the kinship relations were destroyed more promiscuous non-marital ties [were] formed,” a statement that could suggest a profound influence of external factors, such as slave trade and institution of slavery, in the process of the propagation of the Jezebel myth.¹⁷

Slavery was not only an economic system but according to Bush, it “was a complex social organism” wherein “a perverse admixture of fear, hatred, sex, grudging respect and alienation” coexisted together.¹⁸ Thus, one can posit that this peculiar environment could provide a fertile ground for the new social order, characterized by the formation of multiracial relationships, in which the sexual encounters became the norm due to the scarcity of white women. As noted by Marietta Morrissey, many contemporary visitors to the Caribbean Islands were intrigued by the notion that the West Indies represented “the land of sexual opportunity for the young European males.”¹⁹ Although forced sexual acts were common, a new paradigm was established. As Marietta Morrissey has underlined, many black slave women “learned the value of sexual ties with European men,” an assertion that reflected the economic reasons behind women’s motives.²⁰ Although, for the observers of this new women’s behavior, their actions suggested a promiscuous undertone, it might also represent a way for slave women to either minimize the burden of their slavery or even pave the way to their freedom. How pronounced this form of intimate arrangement was is best represented in the example of the French Caribbean Islands. For

¹⁵ Trevor Burnard, *Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire: Thomas Thistlewood and His Slaves in the Anglo-Jamaican World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 210.

¹⁶ Barbara Bush-Slimani, “Hard Labor: Women, Childbirth and Resistance in British Caribbean Slave Societies” *Colonial and Post-Colonial History, History Workshop* 36, (Autumn 1993): 92.

¹⁷ Marietta Morrissey, *Slave Women in the New World: Gender Stratification in the Caribbean* (Lawrence: University of Kansas, 1991), 146.

¹⁸ Barbara Bush, *Slave Women in Caribbean Society*, 23.

¹⁹ Marietta Morrissey, *Slave Women in the New World*, 146.

²⁰ Ibid., 147.

example, the number of black unmarried women who cohabitated as white men's mistresses was: for St. Domingue in the year 1785 – 8,490 concubines and in Martinique in the year 1780 – approximately 3,150.²¹

According to Bernard Moitt, a Professor of History at University of Toronto, the profound disproportion of white women over the black in the French Caribbean, wherein the latter constituted a majority, suggests that black and mixed race women "appealed to the senses in the view of contemporary observers [...] as pleasure seekers whose entire being was given over the sensual delight," thus contributing to the stereotype of black female promiscuity.²² Furthermore, Sir Hilary McD Beckles presented a very interesting argument pointing to the myth of the African Jezebel in his article *White Women and Slavery in the Caribbean* in which he connected, although not explicitly, white women with the act of disseminating false perceptions of black female promiscuous sexual behavior.

While exploring the participation of white women in market economy, McD. Beckles has underlined that a large portion of unmarried women owned and managed the "enterprises in the sector service, generally related to less moral behavior of the patrons: taverns, sex houses, slave rental services."²³ He has especially elucidated the kind of services, which "boarded on the illicit and illegal."²⁴ What he asserted is an interesting and provoking argument that suggests that white women, by *prostituting* black females, inadvertently contributed to the continuation of the stereotype of either black promiscuity or black women's insatiable libido. To support his argument, McD. Beckles has quoted a British naval officer who in 1806 reported:

Knowledge of a respectable Creole white lady, who for a living, lets her negro girls to anyone who will pay her for their persons, under the denomination of washerwoman, and becomes very angry if they don't come home in the family way.²⁵

²¹ Lucien Peyraud, *L'esclavage aux Antilles Françaises avant 1789* (Pointe-a-Pitre: Emile Désormeaux), 419, as quoted in Marietta Morissey, *Slave Women in the New World*, 146, 148.

²² Bernard Moitt, *Women and Slavery in the French Antilles, 1635-1848* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 9.

²³ Hilary McD. Beckles, "White Women and Slavery in the Caribbean," *Colonial and Post-Colonial History* N/A, no. 36 (Autumn 1993): 71.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 71.

²⁵ Major Wwill, "Memoirs of an Old Officer," 1815, 386, MSS. Division, Library of Congress, as quoted in Hilary McD. Beckles, "White Women and Slavery in the Caribbean," 72.

Among women who actively participated in this controversial entrepreneurship were white mothers who through their actions also participated in this particular myth creation. By encouraging their sons to live together with colored women, as noted by McD. Beckles, they “played a critical role in shaping the ideological content of [the] white male’s sexual attitude toward black women,” including perhaps, the notion of their sexual morality.²⁶ Furthermore, by buying young women to “sexually [serve] their sons,” the mothers were creating a dichotomy between white women and the “socio-sexual companionship” of the women of color.²⁷

Creating impressions of black promiscuity was, of course, not only limited to engaging African slaves in illicit activities. What contributed to the stereotype of the Black Jezebel was also the emotional stress caused by the industry of slavery, including the capture in Africa, processing in African factories, and the infamous Middle Passage - places where sexual brutalization took place. As a result, slaves removed from their familiar environment, became vulnerable not only to physical abuse but also to psychological withdrawal and unconscious self-preservation. Joseph C. Dorsey, an Associate Professor of History and African Studies at Purdue University, has recently demonstrated that according to court records from the Spanish Caribbean islands, the claims of complaints “of excessive workloads, beatings, and insufficient clothing and nourishment outweighed claims of rape and other sexual abuses.”²⁸ From this statement, slaves’ reluctance to claim sexual violations could be interpreted as explicitly libidinous character of the African women.

However, in order to understand fully the complexity of this assumption, one would need to delineate differences in the original cultural misunderstanding of the first Europeans who traveled to Africa from those perceptions of African women as seen through the eyes of those who had the first contact with African females after their arrival to the Caribbean. As the first group simply failed to acknowledge the women’s behavior within the context of African culture, the other group could only see the false image of psychological trauma caused by the sexual conditioning of women during the captivity and the middle passage.

Carolle Charles, professor of sociology at Baruch College of the City University of New York, has underlined that element that could suggest

²⁶ Hilary McD. Beckles, “White Women and Slavery in the Caribbean,” 73.

²⁷ Ibid., 74.

²⁸ Joseph C. Dorsey, “It Hurt Much at the Time’: Patriarchy, Rape, and Culture, and the Slave Body-Semiotic,” in *The Culture of Gender and Sexuality in the Caribbean*, ed. Linden Lewis (Gainesville: The University Press of Florida, 2003), 300.

propagation of the stereotype of black female sexual proclivity was the change in the way women altered the meaning of sexuality in order to “redefine politics of body.”²⁹ According to Charles, Haitian women, for example, used their own “sexuality and their reproductive capacities as a means of gaining a relative or temporary respite from the horrors of their situation.”³⁰ It is important to understand, however, that it was not sexual encounters they were looking for, but rather the capacity to use their sexuality to mediate the social contract. Therefore, within this context, women’s sexuality can be seen not as lustful satisfaction of a desire, but more appropriately as a sexual construct wherein “the body becomes the social expression and embodiment of real and potential economic relations.”³¹

Of course, a similar socio-economic approach can be argued for other Caribbean Islands wherein the black slave women learned the value of intimate ties with white men. Although pragmatically, one can argue that willful and premeditated engagement in unequal and not always officially sanctioned relations could constitute women’s and men’s sexual licentiousness, the careful evaluation of the historical backgrounds easily dismisses this assumption. One of the interesting examples of this relationship is presented in the case of Jamaican overseer and plantation owner Thomas Thistlewood, and his multiple slave women, including Phibbah, his long term mistress, one who skillfully manipulated the prevailing sexual practices to gain personal benefits. One can argue that despite the master-slave structure, she utilized her sexuality to improve her life as well as to procure some benefits for other slave compatriots. Trevor Burnard, professor of American History and head of the Department of American Studies at the University of Sussex, who extensively studied Thistlewood’s diary, skillfully points out that “Phibbah’s lengthy sexual and emotional relationship with Thistlewood was more than just the exploitation of a black woman.”³² Thus, within this context it will be difficult to blame her for the breakdown of sexual mores. Thistlewood’s other women—Egypt, Susannah, and Mazarine—were able to receive substantial monetary incentives for having a sexual relationship with their master. As noted by

²⁹ Carolle Charles, “Popular Imaginaries of Gender and Sexuality: Poor and Working-Class Haitian Women’s Discourses on the Use of Their Bodies,” in *The Culture of Gender and Sexuality in the Caribbean*, ed. Linden Lewis (Gainesville: The University Press of Florida, 2003), 179.

³⁰ Ibid., 179.

³¹ Ibid., 184.

³² Trevor Burnard. *Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire*, 228.

Burnard, "the sums earned from what was essentially forced prostitution could be considerable."³³

Despite the personal circumstances of many slave women, the slave environment itself contributed intensely to the creation of the stereotype of African Jezebel. However, one cannot dismiss the argument that the sexual myth of Jezebel also functioned as a tool for controlling African female slaves. Therefore, the stereotype of black women's sexual salaciousness added credibility to white men and women's sexual exploitation of slaves. Unfortunately, long lasting mistreatment of slaves, either within the scope of the economic utility or within the extent of sexual abuse and gratification, provided the long lasting consequence in the form of false perception of the African and African-Creole women. Today, many years after slavery ended, the specter of black Jezebel still haunts many women in the Caribbean basin. One can state that the issue of alleged African women's promiscuity is not an easy topic to analyze. It is even more difficult to debunk the myth of the African Jezebel. By using historical sources and modern scholarly historiography, this study attempts to bring readers closer to understanding the delicate and often enigmatic nuances of the factors that directly and indirectly contributed to the formation of the myth of the black Jezebel. Of course, the origin of the myth of the black Jezebel cannot be solved without asking more questions and it seems even more difficult to explicate every single nuance of the black women's intimate behaviors that could contribute to the formation of this myth. Therefore, to continue the scholarly discourse on the subject matter, one must avoid some remnants of the destructive past, such as misconception and prejudice, and find his or her own argument for this interesting and intricate topic.

³³ Ibid., 161.