**Black Women and Their Perceived Femininity in Contemporary Society**

1. **Introduction**

Studies have shown that African-American or “black” women are perceived as less feminine than their racial counterparts. As a result of this perception, black women experience discrimination in the form of greater violence, less empathy from their peers, less respect, especially as victims of sexual abuse or violence. Several circumstances have played a part in this ideology or worldly perception of black women. These circumstances can be identified in two major factors: historical events and sociocultural influences.

It is a known fact that women of color, especially African-American or “black” women, have been treated unfairly throughout history; they were forced to slavery during the Transatlantic Era wherein they experienced several types of maltreatment, they were underrepresented and unfairly treated in court hearings during the Jim Crow Era, and they continue to experience prejudice from the government, the police, and the media. These factors have played a part in people perceiving black women as less feminine which, in turn, increased the bias and discrimination against them in modern society. This is evidenced by the many instances of institutional inequality and negative bias on famous black women today.

This study will discuss the origin of this ideology of black women being less feminine, the effects of historical events and sociocultural factors in promulgating it, and its implications in modern society. For the sake of this paper, the word “discrimination” will be used to describe the many forms of unequal treatment and negative bias.

1. **Thesis Statement**

Black women nowadays, despite the widespread support for diversity and racial equality, still experience and this is because they are perceived as less feminine than their racial counterparts.

This is the result of historical events in America including the Transatlantic Slave Trade and the Jim Crow Era as well as several contemporary sociocultural influences. These together have impacted how black women are perceived in modern society.

1. **Historical Events and Sociocultural Influences on Black Women Femininity**

A study by Davis et al. states that Black women or African American women are not perceived as feminine as their racial counterparts (white women) (820). This is because the construct of femininity is typically Eurocentric and is not applicable to Black women given their unique experiences through history (Davis 820). These “unique experiences through history” are generally attributed to the era of slavery when the Strong Black Woman Ideology was widely adapted and culturally idealized. Looking into the history of Black women, we can see how this ideology came to be.

**Historical Events**

During the Transatlantic slave trade, black women were seen as manly because of their perceived ability to work as much as their male counterparts, which, truthfully, they were not given the choice to do otherwise. The workload on black women being imposed on their white female counterparts was unfathomable at that time because of how Eurocentric ideologies of women and their femininity portrayed them as frail and delicate – not suitable for manual labor (Davis). Black parturian slave women were also even expected to work up until they give birth and after it, further strengthening the ideology of black women being manly or less feminine.

In addition to their toll as owned slaves and the punishments they received from their owners until childbirth, black women were experimented on by white doctors. A book entitled Medical Bondage: Race, Gender, and the Origins of American Gynecology illustrates how medical doctors and slave owners who have formed close relationships with them practiced medicine on black women’s bodies (Owens 42). In these experiments, women were operated on without anesthetics (as well as without consent). This added to their image as “medical superbodies”. Owens further states that these circumstances led to the prevailing notion that enslaved women or black women were impervious to pain, to the point where slave owners would be surprised if their “slave” fainted from the pain they inflict on them (44).

Furthermore, during the height of slavery, colonists sexualized black women as a form of otherization; giving them qualities as that of a man who is aggressive and lustful – not feminine or at all. A figure of history which most exemplifies this is the black women slave Sarah Baartman who was hypersexualized. The Black slave woman was sold to a predatory showman named Reaux with whom she became the object of economical, sexual, and scientific interest (Elkins). She was depicted by Europeans as promiscuous and aggressively lustful. A caricature of Baartman in a French print titled *La Belle Hottentot* depicted her “…nearly fully nude on a platform while men and women stare at her behind, mouths agape in expressions of shock. She covers one breast and stares directly out of the print, enticing the viewer in to participate in the act of voyeurism” (Sapiro-Gheiler).

Merriam-Webster defines femininity as “having characteristics that are traditionally thought to be suitable of women”. The heavy manual labor that Black women did that depicted them as “manly”, the false pretense of their high pain tolerance, and their hypersexualization that depicted them as promiscuous and sexually aggressive are characteristics that are not “traditionally thought to be suitable for women” at all. Thus, these historical events are the most prominent origin of the less feminine ideation of black women which eventually led to its reinforcement in contemporary sociocultural factors.

**Sociocultural Influences**

Fast forward to the Jim Crow Era, both a historical and sociocultural factor affecting the black women’s perceived femininity, Black women were stripped or doused from having a voice in court or in seeking justice. According to Basu, “the ways in which black women were discriminated against in the justice system overlapped with that of white women and black men, but black women faced a “double-discrimination” – both for their gender and their race. This was most evident in how criminal cases were approached such as in cases involving rape of black women by white men. In that era, “The conviction of a white man for the rape of a black woman was “virtually unthinkable”” (Basu). Also, because black women were severely underrepresented, black women, rape victims also typically lost their cases ranging from domestic violence to sexual assault, and police brutality – making them easy target for different types of violence and abuse.

Black women were also discriminated for their place in society. They were not only seen as the face of poverty but they were also accused of being abusive towards the taxpayers’ money. This negative bias stems from Ronald Reagan’s run for presidency in 1976. In one of his speeches, he was discussing how the federal government program on public assistance was encouraging waste and abuse. His most prominent example of this was of a woman who used “80 names, 30 addresses, 15 telephone numbers to collect food stamps, Social Security, veterans’ benefits for four nonexistent deceased veteran husbands, as well as welfare” to gain an income of $150,000 a year. This woman became known as the “welfare queen”, a term that was “designed to conjure racist stereotypes of a single black mother living large on the taxpayers’ largesse, collecting government checks while bedecked in diamonds and driving a Cadillac” (Brockell). This further gave way to people developing stereotypes of black women as having uncontrolled sexuality and laziness.

Lastly, black women experienced discrimination from government institutions, more specifically hospitals or the healthcare system. Black women as slaves were, of course, not given the same medical attention as white women which is why maternal mortality is higher for black women. However, it was reported that from 1940-1990, overall maternal survival had improved but still the maternal mortality was higher for black women. The possible explanations for maternal mortality are pregnancy-related morbidity, access to and use of healthcare services, and content and quality of care (“Differences in Maternal Mortality”). This shows that, although not all, the majority of black women, post-slavery, still do not receive as much needed assistance as white women which results in their higher maternal mortality.

As mentioned, the ideation of the lessened Black women femininity was reinforced by different forms of discrimination through sociocultural influences. This was seen through discrimination in justice systems, discrimination of the government, and the significantly lowered position and status in society.

1. **Implications of the Historical and Sociocultural Influences on Black Women Today**

All of these historical events and sociocultural influences that contributed to the how lessened perception of femininity in black women boils down to one thing: the lessened femininity of black women resulted in lessened respect for them as human beings, this consequently resulted to a widespread discrimination of their race and gender. Implications of these influences can still be seen today, unfortunately even with famous pop culture personalities.

One example is Megan thee Stallion, an American rapper and singer-songwriter, who professed her fears of the police when she got shot in the foot by her fellow rapper. In the incident, she mentioned how she felt that Black women were unprotected [despite police intervention] (Pfeiffer). Here, we see that the fear of the unequal treatment of Black women in justice systems still haunts the personality. If a widely-renowned and supported artist still fears the prejudice in a government-ruled court, there is no doubt that lay-Black women fear the same.

Another black woman to experience this discrimination is Meghan Markle. Markle is technically a part of the Royal family until she and her husband decided to part ways with the family. The issue is quite widespread with the couple, Markle and Prince Harry, going on air and the Royal family releasing a statement about the issue. In the article written by Lang, she reports that the couple’s son was refused the title of Prince as well as the protection of Royal security; a decision made because of the child’s skin color (Lang). This shows how the esteemed Royal family is unwilling to accept a Black woman, as well as her son, into their family. We may presume that they did so in fear of lowering their rank or power of royalty.

A black woman, in support of Markle, even came to her defense by publicly offering support to the actress saying “I know firsthand the sexism and racism institutions and the media use to vilify women and people of color to minimize us, to break us down, and demonize us.” This shows that, even in the progressive society we are in, the negative bias and discrimination against Black woman still has not faded.

With these few, yet powerful, evidences of discrimination, we are able to prove that the implications of Black women’s past, and how they were treated, are still affecting the Black women of today.

1. **Conclusion**

In conclusion, Black women suffer discrimination in the form of greater violence, less empathy, and less respect because throughout history, they have been perceived as less feminine that their racial counterparts. This perception or ideation is a result of historical events that promulgated their masculinity. This promulgated the perception of lessened femininity of black women and its reinforcement in contemporary sociocultural influences consequently resulted in people regarding Black women with less value as human beings thus, the discrimination. Unfortunately, modern Black women still suffer the ideology of less femininity and its discriminatory consequences today.

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