

## **Fetishism and Sexual Objectification towards African (Black) Women in Modern Society: Analyzing the Portrayal of African Women in the Media**

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### **Abstract**

In the perspective of multicultural feminism, beside society needs to end the subordination of women to men, it also needs to end the subordination of women to fellow women depending on her race, religion, education, etc. Multicultural feminism also emphasizes the acknowledgement of the difference between each woman's background to understand their issues. Even so, the fact remains that women of color; African women in the case of this paper, still face objectification by society. While considered as possessing the ideal physique to fit men's sexual desires, African women are still considered subordinate than Caucasian women. This does not only emphasize the portrayal of women as objects to men, but also emphasizes the consideration of women of color being in lower class than Caucasian women. Thus, with consideration to the way African women are portrayed in the media as exemplified by the case analysis in this paper, it could be concluded that African women (and other women of color) are still more often objectified in modern society.

Key words: African women, fetishism, objectification

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### **INTRODUCTION**

According to the Oxford Dictionary, fetishism itself refers to “a form of sexual desire in which gratification is linked to an abnormal degree to a particular object, item of clothing, part of the body, etc.”<sup>1</sup> From this definition, we may simplify “fetish” as a mere way of perceiving a certain object as being *deeply* alluring, resulting in deep desire. This becomes the essential point of fetishism itself: the desire towards an object. Which, in the case of this paper, happens towards part(s) of the female body, or the whole body entirely of African or black women.

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<sup>1</sup> “Fetishism,” Oxford Dictionaries, accessed October 7<sup>th</sup> 2016,  
<https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/fetishism>



Since the early days of history, the African race has notoriously been associated with racism and slavery in Western countries, falling as victims of objectification and eventually sexual harassments. Women slaves in particular have historically been accounted for as objects, often sexually abused or “used” by their masters.<sup>2</sup> The point of this early sexual exploitation of women in a culture with a strong patriarchal way of perception, is even since then women of color have been thought of as mere objects; bought, sold, and eventually owned to be used by their owners, which were Caucasian men. This way of treatment did not only emphasize the already ongoing social understanding that men held more power than women, but also unconsciously drew a line of separation to women of color in terms of not only social and economic class, but also, and more importantly, worth. This may be the basis of multicultural feminism itself, which is the type of feminism to be used in analyzing this paper.

Multicultural feminism stresses on the issue of women being suppressed due to her race, religion, sexual preference, age, education, occupation, health, and so on. According to Indonesian feminist Gadis Arivia, this type of feminism began in the United States, a nation known for its diverse population resulting from years of incoming immigrants. Multiculturalism is an idea promoted as a response from this diversity, emphasizing and not scrutinizing the existing differences. This perspective also stresses the notion that feminists have failed to acknowledge the differences between the average upper Caucasian females, who are Christians and heterosexuals (ini enaknya dihapus aja atau bagaimana? Soalnya gak semua wanita Kaukasia seperti ini juga, CMIW), and other women who are coming from developing countries with different backgrounds. The failure to acknowledge these differences in addressing feminist issues, according to feminist Elizabeth Spelman, is the flaw in traditional

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<sup>2</sup> “The Slave Experience: Men, Women, and Gender, Historical Overview,” PBS, accessed October 7<sup>th</sup> 2016, <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/slavery/experience/gender/history2.html>



feminism. Spelman also notes that in attempting to understand women's issues, there is a need to not to fit women into one general characteristic only.

African feminists have stressed the importance in considering racism, sexism, and classism along feminism. There has also been a suggestion that African women in the US may not even be thought of as being in the same 'class' as Caucasian women. In terms of sexuality, there has also been significant difference between African and Caucasian feminists. For instance, in the pornography industry, African feminists have made the accusation of there being racist, because African women are more often considered to be objects in pornography compared to Caucasian women. Responses to these different treatments to the women in pornography has also been debated, with there is an accusation that men (either African or Caucasian) tend to be more 'proud' if they have 'tamed' Caucasian women in sexual intercourse, than if they have 'tamed' African women. African women involved in pornography have also been more thought as 'animals'. Furthermore, in addition to sexism, in several more aspects such as politics, social, and economics, have also shown that they are needed to be considered when attempting to understand feminism issues.<sup>3</sup>

Finally, this paper aims to produce an answer to its research question: **how are African women objectified in modern society?**

### **Fetishism and Objectification towards African Women in the Media**

This perception of women as mere objects of (sexual) fantasies goes on to this day, where modern objectification towards African women remains. To better understand current ongoing examples of the objectification of African women, this paper will analyze the case of Jean-Paul Goude's photo shoot of reality television celebrity, Kim Kardashian.

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<sup>3</sup> Gadis Arivia, *Filsafat Berperspektif Feminis* (Jakarta: Yayasan Jurnal Perempuan, 2003), 132-137.



Jean-Paul Goude, a renowned French photographer who has been known for his preference to use African women stylizing in explicit poses as his models, caused a sensational stir in the media when a popular photo shoot of Kim Kardashian for *Paper* magazine was released. The photo shoot revealed Kardashian posing with frontal and posterior nudity, and also containing an iconic photograph of the reality television celebrity popping a bottle of champagne splashing backwards onto her posterior. Previously, Goude had published a similar photograph of a nude African woman with champagne among his other famous works of African female models posing nude in scandalous poses (such as one of model Grace Jones kneeling nude in a cage with a sign on it saying “do not feed the animal”).

Goude’s eventual confession of his fetishism for African women does nothing to halt the scrutiny following his works, with the media accusing Goude of doing objectification towards African women’s bodies after the release of his book titled *Jungle Fever*<sup>4</sup>, which the title itself referring to the famous urban term of a person being sexually attracted to African people.<sup>5</sup> This term may also be associated with the understanding of a person having some sort of *fever* or un-wellness for having preference to women (or men) from the *jungle* (women or men from Africa are associated with vast jungles). Goude’s constant style of work, using African female models posing in what the media would consider as “primal and almost nonhuman matter”, also evoked outrage in the media for representing apparent male unrealistic sexual projections towards women. This idea was followed by yet another accusation of Goude’s disregard towards African women, whose body features he attempted to accentuate with his Kardashian’s photo shoot. Critics following this

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<sup>4</sup> “More Thoughts on Jean-Paul Goude, The Black Jezebel Stereotype and That Racist Kim Kardashian Photoshoot,” *The Frisky*, accessed October 7<sup>th</sup> 2016, <http://www.thefrisky.com/2014-11-13/more-thoughts-on-jean-paul-goude-the-black-jezebel-stereotype-that-racist-kim-kardashian-photoshoot/>

<sup>5</sup> “Jungle Fever,” *Urban Dictionary*, accessed October 7<sup>th</sup> 2016, <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=jungle+fever>



photo shoot circulated around the fact that Kardashian, who was used to represent the ideal of an African woman, was not African descent<sup>6</sup>.

Meanwhile, the emphasize on Jones and Kardashian's posterior size on both photo shoots as Goede's focus on both women's bodies may be the result of the common perception in society that African women are known for the rather significant size of their posteriors, breasts, and lips. This later shaped the common belief of African women being on the "thicker, curvier" side compared to Caucasian women. Goede's photo shoot lured on media opinions that the "ideal" figure of an African woman he was attempting to feature on his photos resembled the particular African woman's historically famous for her noticeably sized posterior, Saartjie or Sarah Baartman.

Baartman was a South African woman, who in the early 1800's was brought to Europe to be later paraded as a circus freak-show attraction for her unusually large posterior which the audiences were allowed to touch her.<sup>7</sup> In my opinion, the similarity of "fascination" towards the size of an African woman's posterior on both Goede's photo shoot and the case of Baartman just show how much farther the objectification towards African women's bodies has been done since back then and until now, both with significant disregard to the basic right that a woman, regardless of the color of her skin, has treated or featured so inhumanly in the media (it's more apparent in Goede's case in his photo shoot with Jones inside a cage acting as an animal).

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<sup>6</sup> "Fetishism of Black Women in Mainstream Culture Continues to Rage, Helped Along by Celebrities," Atlanta Black Star, accessed October 7<sup>th</sup> 2016, <http://atlantablackstar.com/2014/12/06/fetishism-black-women-mainstream-culture-history-future/>

<sup>7</sup> "The Significance of Sarah Baartman," BBC, accessed October 7<sup>th</sup> 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-35240987>



**ANALYSIS**

Multicultural feminism itself attempts to promote the equal rights to both Caucasian women and women of color. Both of them deserve to never be treated as (sexual) objects, amongst other rights not to be treated inferior to men. Here, taking the case of Goude's photo shoots and basing it on Baartman's story, it becomes apparent how sexual objectification towards black women still occurs in society. And although in modern times it is admitted unlikely that women will publicly be exhibited as a sex slave, but fetishes and sexual objectification towards African women in the media run the risk of society thinking it is *okay* for them to perceive and treat these African women as (sexual) objects. And while it is unfair to promptly assume that Caucasian women are not subject to the danger of objectification, but, in the fact, it still remains that African women still run more and deeper this risk, considering society itself hasn't yet been completely free of racism. It's common for urban culture to romanticize the features of an African woman as the contemporary ideals, such as their skin being deemed as exotic or their figures being deemed as sexually desirable, yet African Americans in the United States in general are often still campaigning to receive the same rights received by Caucasian US citizens through the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter.<sup>8</sup>

The rising popularity of celebrities with body figures differencing from the usual thin Caucasian ideals such as Nicki Minaj, Kim Kardashian, Beyonce, and others, while helping shape a healthier, broader range of body type ideals for women in society, in my opinion, at the same time also helps promote sexual objectification of women's bodies since the common public perception began to turn into the conclusion that men would prefer thicker and curvier women (generally associated with women of color) over thinner women. Yes, society began to accept that curvier women as beautiful as thinner women. But, society also began to unconsciously

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<sup>8</sup> "The Rise of Black Lives Matter: Trying to Break the Cycle of Violence and Silence," CNN, accessed October 7<sup>th</sup> 2016, <http://edition.cnn.com/2015/12/28/us/black-lives-matter-evolution/>



support the notion that the bigger the breasts, the posterior, and the more a woman's body becomes desirable for men, the better she is. And while this may help integrate the beauty of African women into the ideals society holds, it doesn't necessarily liberate African women from the objectification held onto them.

Furthermore, to answer the previously proposed question in the beginning of this paper, which is how African women are objectified in modern society, this paper has reached the conclusion that the objectification of African women tends to be on sexual terms. By referring to the previously mentioned case of Baartman in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it's apparent how since then the physical characteristics of African women, which may differ from the physical characteristics of Caucasian women, have brought on interest in society for being thought of as sexually alluring or captivating. This leads to fetishism and the tendency to project sexual thoughts onto women who possess these physical characteristics, commonly African women. Not only both cases have illustrated the fetishism upon African women's bodies, they have also illustrated yet again another example of the subordination towards women to men. In this case, placing women as *objects* of men's sexual desires, going as far as presenting women in a certain way in the media in attempt to please these desires, also shows how women are considered as men's subordinates (men being the subjects and women being the objects).

## CONCLUSION

Multicultural feminism emphasizes the need for equality, not only between men and women but also among women in general. The mere fact that women of color still face the possibility of not being treated equal to Caucasian women poses its own issues in society, especially in a patriarchal society where women have not yet been even completely considered equal to men. For these reasons, women of color face a bigger obstacle; they are not only regarded as being worth less than a man, but they are also regarded as being less than Caucasian women. Multicultural feminism



also points out the understanding that the world often still fails to recognize the ongoing subordination between women of multiple races and skin colors, among the subordination of women to men in general. The case of Jean-Paul Goude's has a tendency to portray African women as objects of sexual desire through his photo shoots depicts the reality of the fetishism and objectification towards African women. While African women are portrayed as possessing the 'quality' deemed by men as sexually desirable (thus becoming yet again an *object* of male sexual fantasies and/or fetishes), and possessing the ideal physique for women in society, African women are still valued no more than the worth of their physical appearances.

To end the objectification towards women of color, it needs to begin with building the understanding that in fighting for the values of feminism to be accepted in society, women are equals and no woman should feel less included just because of the color of her skin, or because she lives in a world where her ancestors will forever be noted in history as slaves. A woman is a woman regardless of the size of her breasts, or whether or not she has curves. A woman born with dark, curly hair is not worth any less than a woman born as a blonde, just like any woman is not worth any less than a man. And finally, a woman needs to believe that in spite of the shape, the size, or the color of the body she was born in, she was born to a body that belonged to herself and never to anyone else.

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