

Examining the Roles of African-American Academy Award Winning Actresses Between the Years of 2000-2010

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Abstract

Representations of African-American women in contemporary American cinema have been a heavily critiqued area in academia. Stereotypical roles and representations of African-American women in contemporary American cinema have recurred throughout Hollywood's history. The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences is one of the most prestigious award organizations in the motion picture industry. Since the beginning of the Academy Awards, there have only been a few African-American actresses who have won Academy Awards for their performances. However, between the years of 2000-2010 there has been a significant increase in the number of African-American actresses winning Oscars. This research study takes a look at the roles of African-American Academy Award winning actresses between the years 2000-2010 and how they may represent and construct Black women's cultural identity.

Introduction

The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences is one of the most well-known and influential organizations of the motion picture industry. The Academy has been recognizing Hollywood's greatest producers, performers, and professionals since 1927. The organization was founded in 1927 by 36 leading men and one woman who were influential in the motion picture industry during that time. Pioneers such as Louis B. Mayer, Conrad Nagel, and Fred Niblo, along with many others, established a community and a popular award ceremony that still brings Hollywood's stars together every year to honor and recognize one another for their accomplishments and creative work. This organization rewards the motion picture industry's most talented professionals for their achievements and performances every year and has a huge influence on what audiences deem to be the best in the industry. Receiving this praise from this

industry may allow audiences to see the impact and power that this has on the actors and actresses' performances.

At birth of the Academy, with the exception of one woman, all of the members in the academy were Caucasian males. At present, Academy consists of over 6,000 members who have expertise in their area of profession. Among these 6,000 members is an emergence of women and people of color. This broader representation of diversity allows these individuals to contribute to the voting process. The politics of this award system plays a huge role in selecting the types of roles and films that gains recognition and in determining what is considered praiseworthy.

The first African-American woman to ever win an academy award was Hattie McDaniel. McDaniel, won Best Supporting Role for her performance as a mammy in "Gone With the Wind" in 1939. The mammy role is a stereotype that portrays African-American women as a servant figure, which reflects slave women in the antebellum south. Mammy figures were obese, dark-skinned, maternal-figure type of women who were deemed desexualized. Fifty years later, Whoopi Goldberg won Best Supporting Role for her performance as a comedic medium in 1990's "Ghost." Goldberg's role as a medium was a stereotypical role as well. The character's comedic and trickery characteristic reflects the historical stereotype of African-Americans as coons. This stereotype is the most degrading of all black stereotypes and deems African-Americans as a minstrel figure.

In the time frame of this study, three African-American women have won Academy Awards for their performances. Halle Berry, Jennifer Hudson, and Mo'Nique, each are contributors to the surge of Academy Award winning African-American women. Each of their roles not only challenges the traditional negative stereotypical roles of African-American women, but they also offer a message about the way in which black women gain mobility and power. The surge of Black actresses winning Academy Awards within the last decade may spark the emergence of something significant in contemporary American cinema.

Literature Review

Stereotypical roles that were associated with black women were the "mammy" which depicted Black women as a servant figure, the "jezebel" which depicted Black women as sexually provocative, and the sapphire" which depicted Black woman as overbearing and undesirable to men. These three particular roles were the only images of black women that people would see on films before the 1970's. (Givens & Monahan). As time progressed, other roles included stereotypes such as the "tragic mulatto", which is a Black woman who favors a White woman, and "Welfare Queen", which is someone who collects excessive welfare payments to financially support herself. Stereotypical roles were created to stigmatize African-Americans and African-American women, and formulate generalizations about African-American identity and culture. Mantau suggest that "persistent and repeated negative images of black women in film can be detrimental to the group generally, and to black women specifically" (Manatu 2003). This statement reflects the idea that a constant reinforcement of stereotypes will strengthen popular belief and generalize African American females a certain way.

African-American Hollywood actresses struggled for visibility in the 20th century as a result of the industry simultaneously degrading and marginalizing them (Regester 2010). In the

history of Hollywood's cinema, many African-American actresses' contributions to cinema have been abrogated or minimalized (Regester 2010). Black actresses such as Dorothy Dandridge and Lena Horne had to live in the shadow of white female actresses in regards to the leading roles and play parts that were opposite of the white female (Regester 2010). Roles held by African American females have been overlooked more often than their white counterparts. The White women was deemed as universally feminine and standardized as the ideal definition of beauty, but black women's bodies were viewed as sex symbols, unattractive, immoral and as the deviant sexual "other" (Manatu 2003).

In the 20th century, black feminist critics and scholars have studied the cinematic representations of African-American women. Many filmmakers, predominately males (both white and black) have produced and directed films about African-American women, but many cultural critics believe that they have failed to capture the experiences of African American women (Manatu 2003). Nearly all of American films starring African-American actresses are directed and produced by males, which may contribute to Black women's experiences within these films, being presented as one-dimensional. The images of African-Americans constructed by films have a considerable impact on the ways in which audiences respond to them (hooks, 1992). Although the pattern of stereotypical roles of African-Americans have become prevalent in American cinema, the essence of black film is not found in the stereotype role, but in what certain talented actors have done with the stereotype (Bogle 2001).

Many scholars have already pointed out obvious stereotypes or negative images depicted by African-American Academy Award winning actresses, but few have examined the complexity of their roles. Wanzo has done an examination on Oscar winning African-American women and their struggles with representing stereotypes and constructing womanhood. Wanzo analyzed Academy Award winning African-American women from Hattie McDaniel to Halle Berry and discovered that their performances in these stereotypical roles tell nuanced stories about African-American women and their roles can be seen as a fully rich and developed character. Reflecting back on the history of African-American actresses and the stereotypical roles they played in films can mislead audiences' perceptions about African-American womanhood and cultural identity (Wanzo 2006). Negative observations and reinforcement of stereotypes could adversely affect views of the entire African-American female population.

The portrayals of black women's sexuality, mobility, attitude, and desires, among other characteristics, have formulated perceptions about African-American women's identity in all forms of media. (Hendricks 2002). Drawing from Olga Idriss Davis's black feminist theory, "black women's discourses are stories of rhetorical strategies of women who transformed the ordinariness of daily life into rhetoric of survival, not only for themselves but for generations beyond" (Davis 2001). Davis suggests that Black women's discourse provides a space not only for experiencing and remembering, but also to reject any myths or stereotypes of Black women's existence (Davis 2001). The history of Black women's lives is symbolic communications that reflects Black women's experiences. Connecting Davis's theories with the performances of African-American actresses, they are able to portray their emotions to the audience and provide insight into the lives of their characters through their roles. As Davis, Hudson, and hooks suggest, the value of personal experiences is at the forefront of black women's identity. Black women's demonstration of those experiences function as evidence that affects black women's

decision-making or knowledge. Black women's history of struggling to be agents and resisting oppression plays a huge role in their strategies of self-evaluation and definition.

Methodology

Rhetorical analysis is commonly used in mass media to analyze television reports, news segments, advertisements and other forms mass communication. Rhetorical analysis looks at intentional persuasion, social values and effects of symbolic forms found in texts, techniques that arts communicate to audiences, persuasion techniques used by characters on one another in dramatic or narrative works, and other elements. Rhetorical analyses of film and any other symbolic communication usually deals with both how works achieve their effects and how works make their appeals to shared interest among people (Blakesley 2003).

Drawing from Blakesley's rhetorical approach to film, I analyzed how particular messages in the films function. I examined the characters, roles, and how the characters personal experiences were used to persuade audiences. Although Blakesley believes that theoretical frameworks such as feminist and cultural perspectives have been used too many times when studying films, these approaches will establish a framework and guide the rhetorical analysis of this study. Davis and Hudson's black feminist theory helps uncover the desires of the characters and how those desires and rhetorical components constructs and represents Black women's cultural identity. Their theories take into account that Black women have a history of attempting to gain recognition and be agents over their own lives and identities. The characters' desires, transformations, and struggles with controlling their own destinies and identities can make the depictions of these characters seem realistic. Strong deliveries of the performances and the recognition of the characters as multi-dimensional can allow audiences to witness the transformations among the characters in the films. One of the possible reasons these performances may have been so powerful is because of the actresses lived experience and how they drew on them to portray the character.

Rhetorical analysis offers us a way to interpret the performance of ways of knowing (Blakelsey and Prelli). In other words, rhetorical analysis can be used in cinematic presentations to examine the characters and representations that are displayed and how they possibly affect audience's perceptions. Characters in films may seem familiar to audiences through common stereotypes and this may affect audiences' perception about the film and the roles. Rhetorical analysis cannot prove the kinds of attitudes and perceptions of spectators have of the representations that are depicted in their films, but using rhetorical analysis to examine the roles of Black Academy Award winning actresses can help determine the way these depictions construct Black female identity in certain ways. Not all African-Americans may be able to relate to the characters and their personal experiences, but some women to may be able to connect with the personal experiences depicted by each character to some extent.

As Davis, hooks, and Hudson point out, black women's experiences with subjugation and political disenfranchisement has shaped their destinies and identities. Black women have a tradition of resisting oppression, dominant forces, and social struggles, through their use of personal experience as a critical lens, from which to make sense of womanhood. A Black feminist framework, then, combined with rhetorical analysis provides an integrated focus on not just how characters were portrayed, but also on what purposes and objectives guide their actions. I examined the characters and their interactions, what the characters desired, how people

communicated with them and vice versa. I also analyzed how each character achieved that desire and how they went about achieving it. Although, common stereotypes were evident throughout these films, the rhetorical approach to this study helps shift this paradigm. In order to find this change within these cinematic representations, I used three questions to help guide me through this analysis. What types of characters do these recent award winners play? Do the roles of African-American women in these films perpetuate Eurocentric perceptions of African-American women? Does there seem to be a relationship between the Academy Award winning roles of black women and black women's cultural identity?

Analysis & Discussion

The rhetorical analysis revealed some common threads between each of the African-American Academy Award winners. The characters desired to be loved, obtain social mobility, and have control over their own destinies. They became agents of their own transformations, transformed others through their social interactions and, they all took an active role in creating their own destinies. Davis, Hudson, and Collins' theories about self-evaluation and self-determination are reflected in each of the characters' efforts to strive for power and control. Common stereotypes such as welfare queen, jezebel, and tragic mulatto were depicted by the roles, but the character's choices allows them to fully develop outside of those stereotypes by the end of the film to affect the audience's perceptions of the characters. These roles have caused controversy among scholars and cultural critics because they fear that the continuation of these stereotypical representations exploits not only African-American women, but African-Americans in general. Media representations have strong influences on the way that the people perceive race, gender, and class, and the utilization of stereotypes can increase negative perceptions; however the rhetorical approach functions in ways that may change the viewer's perspectives. Each of the characters makes choices that may be considered undesirable in order to achieve their desires.

In 2001, Halle Berry won an Academy Award for Best Leading Role for her performance in the romantic-drama "Monster's Ball." Halle Berry's character, Leticia Musgrove, desired an emotional connection and stability. After struggling to maintain a marriage with her incarcerated husband for eleven years, Leticia finds herself overwhelmed and exhausted financially and emotionally. After her husband's execution and after losing her son in a hit and run car accident, Leticia develops a romantic relationship with a Caucasian man Hank. The two come together because they share common experience. They both suffer the loss of a son whom they had abused emotionally and verbally; their guilt made them vulnerable and in need of emotional support. Despite the fact that her lover comes from a racist background and even when she discovers that he took an active role in her husband's execution, Leticia overcomes racial barriers and is willing to share her life with someone who comes from a complex background.

In the beginning of the film, we see racist characteristics from Hank's character toward African-Americans and the emotionless and prideful attitude he encountered while executing Leticia's husband. The way that he reacts to Leticia shifts the perspective of the film in another direction. This sudden shift of behavior in Leticia's lover shows the transformation that she has made in him through her interactions and commonalities with him. Giving him the emotional

capacity that he desired as well and allowing him to care for her in ways that he didn't care for his son, Leticia's vulnerability gave him a second chance at loving someone the right way.

In the beginning of the film, audiences may see Berry's character as a strong single mother, but she was emotionally detached. Fulfilling her needs to be sexually satisfied makes her character come off as the jezebel stereotype. This may leave audiences to believe that she is so desperate that she is willing to engage in a relationship with a racist Caucasian male, but by the end of the film, audiences witness Berry's character transform into a multi-dimensional one. They can see her gain the emotional capacity that allows her to fully develop into someone that audiences can relate to. Audiences not only witness her transformation, but they also witness her transform her lover through her interactions with him.

Although Halle Berry has been highly criticized for her performance in this film, specifically for the overt sex scene with Billy Bob Thornton; her character is significant to the history of Black women's lived experiences in regards to racism. Black feminist theory emphasizes the history of African-American women struggling with racial oppression, cultural identity, and domestic and financial adversities in America since the slave era. In an interview with Terry Keefe from Venice Magazine, Halle Berry said that she had to fight for the part and convince Marc Foster that she was right for it. Her struggles with racism, financial burdens, and identity helped her identify with the character. She felt that she was capable of bringing life and dimension to this character because of her personal lived experiences.

In 2006, Jennifer Hudson won Best Supporting Role for her performance as Effie White in the hit musical film and based on the theatrical play, "Dreamgirls" based on a true story. Effie White was the group's lead and best singer. A woman with a strong and powerful voice to match her assertive personality, Effie was determined to make her dreams a reality. She desired to be a famous singer and rise to stardom on her own terms. She felt power and confidence in her voice and was fully aware of her potential and talents. Effie's voice played a role in her ability to obtain the mobility, and confidence that she needed to express how she felt and articulate her story in the public spheres.

Effie loses access to audiences and opportunities when she was rejected for a more conventional character Deena Jones, someone who is fair-skinned, thinner "more attractive", and appeals to the white mainstream ideal. This character depicts the tragic mulatto stereotype, which is a black woman who favors a White woman. Left feeling neglected and unappreciated, Effie bluntly expressed her emotions which sometimes resulted in heated disputes between her and everyone in the group. Unfortunately, Effie's strong personality led to her dismissal from the group, leaving her to give up her singing career.

In the beginning of the film, Hudson's character may have come off as someone who was very assertive, confrontational, and defensive, which reflects the stereotype of a sapphire figure. By the end of the film, audiences realize that Effie's desire was to take control of her own destiny and identity. Audiences, specifically Black audiences, may also be able to understand Effie's character. In Black culture, color disorientation within the Black race has always been an issue. Effie's anger and frustration was fueled because she was discriminated against because her physical appearance did not meet a white mainstream ideal. Although Effie didn't achieve her desire to be a famous singer, she took an active role in creating her own destiny and she helped the other women in the group do the same. She set an example by refusing to let anyone or

anything jeopardize or get in the way of maintaining her independence and mobility in her life. Effie's struggle for visibility into the mainstream, struggle for her voice to be heard, and enduring the hardships of being a single-mother, represents African-American women's struggle for their voice to be heard in a patriarchal society. In black feminist discourses about black women's agency, Davis and Hudson discuss the women during the Blues tradition. African-American Blues singers would use their voice and music to tell their stories about the oppression, underrepresentation, and marginalization that they experienced throughout their lives. Effie was an example of the Blues women archetype because, like them, she was passionate about her music and wouldn't let anyone compromise her success. Like that of the Blues women, Effie's music was symbolic communication that was a symbolism of resistance and social mobility.

Jennifer Hudson has spoken out about her rise to stardom after winning an Academy Award and how she worked hard to make her dreams come true. Despite her short run in American Idol and coping with a family tragedy, Jennifer Hudson's effort to tell her story and express her identity through her music contributes to her success. Although the stereotypes of "welfare queen" and "tragic mulatto" are reflected in Effie and Deena Jones's character, Hudson's role as Effie, destabilizes reading Hudson's character as an activist, the film ends with Effie performing and reuniting with the group. This ending emphasizes unity and perseverance and how all of the women shared a common dream and standing up against male dominant forces and Eurocentric mainstream ideologies.

In 2009, comedian Mo'Nique won Best Supporting Role for her performance as Mary Lee Johnston in the drama film directed by Lee Daniels, "Precious: Based on the novel Push by Sapphire". Antagonist Mary Lee Johnston, an unemployed mother on welfare, desires to be loved and have a sense of control over her life. After Mary's husband sexually abuses their child Precious, resulting in her having two of his children, Mary is left feeling powerless and unloved. Treating her daughter Precious as if she was worthless and nothing more than a servant, Mary constantly uses vulgar and provocative language when speaking to her daughter. Mary gains that power and control that she desires by instilling not only fear into her daughter's heart, but feelings of inadequacy and worthlessness. Throughout the film, Mary lashes out on Precious about having two children with her father and constantly blames Precious for the dysfunction within the family. This emphasizes that Mary is not only psychologically damaged and ill, but resentful toward her daughter for "stealing" her man.

In the beginning of the film, audiences may see Mo'Nique's character as a lazy and monstrous mother who takes pride in belittling her child. Refusing to let anyone or anything jeopardize her eligibility to receive the government's assistance to financially support herself and her daughter, Mary's character depicts the stereotype of a Welfare Queen. By the end of the film, audiences may feel sympathy for Mary because they realize that she's dealing with is a mental illness. Although Mary tries to justify her abusive behavior, audiences can see that all she really wanted was to feel loved and as if she belonged. They can see that evil-spirited and abusive mother let her guard down as she cries in hope of someone to understand her pain. Audiences can see her character fully develop into a multi-dimensional and complex one. She has desires, basic needs and wants just like anyone else and audiences witnesses the humanity in her character. Although Mary doesn't achieve her desires in a positive way, she does realize that the only way to get her life back into order and gain control over her life is to make amends with her daughter and seek her forgiveness. Not only do audiences witness transformation in Mary, but they also witness the

transformation that she advanced within her daughter. Her extreme abuse and complete power over her daughter drove Precious to become an agent over her own life. Precious accomplishes goals and overcome adversities although her mother made her feel as if she was incapable of doing so. She gains custody of her two children, improves her reading and writing skills, and builds strong relationships with her teacher and classmates; all things that her mother tried to take away from her.

Despite the stereotypical role of Mary Johnston as a welfare queen is presented in the film, it connects to black feminist theories of women struggling to become agents over their own lives. Mary's mental illness hindered her from achieving her desires in a positive way and she was unable to overcome the barriers in her life. Between feeling neglected and rejected by her husband and driving her daughter away, Mary didn't have any order in her life.

Although all African-American women may not share the exact same experiences, the film definitely conveys a powerful message and reaches out to women who may have experienced these particular struggles. Speaking publicly about her traumatic experiences with molestation from her brother, Mo'Nique said that she used that experience to inspire and channel her character as Mary Johnston. Mo'Nique had to relive a traumatic experience by playing the role of Mary, but she said that playing this role empowered her." I no longer want to be considered a victim of molestation", said Monique. "I want to be considered the victor."

Mo'Nique's personal lived experiences contributed to the power that her role held and the ability to make the film seem realistic. With incest being the reality of Mo'Nique's life allowed her to add complexity to her role as well as complexity within the audience's perceptions and feelings about her character.

Conclusions

The distinctiveness within these roles may suggest that the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences may be coming to terms with the Black women's cultural identity and womanhood. The ways that Black women identify, name, and respond to oppressive forces, is represented in particular ways throughout each of the actress' roles. There was a time when Black actresses didn't have distinctions between the roles that they could play nor were they receiving recognition for their performances by award systems such as The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. Although there was an increase in African-American Academy Award winning actresses within the last decade, the issue of the invisibility among African-American actresses still remains.

In my analysis of the films, I found that the roles in these films don't necessarily perpetuate stereotypes of African-American women, but they do utilize them to introduce the characters. Not only can African-American women relate to these stories within these films, but women of all races can relate as well; particularly if their lived experiences are reflected. These roles reflect full, rich, and developed characters as multi-dimensional human beings who have basic human desires, needs, and wants. These stereotypes work in these films because these are stereotypes that audiences are familiar with, which makes audiences believe that the film that they are viewing is the same as any other film they've seen before. However, there is a bigger message behind it and some may understand the essence of the story.

Both Black women's cultural identity and the roles of African-American Academy Award winning actresses are both complex things. Living in a society where women are constantly trying to overcome social and political struggles, they are always trying to have control over their lives on their own terms. Black women have always had the desire to have power and control over their own destinies, but dichotomies such as male domination and racial oppression have presented barriers, which is why the characters' interest in self-determination and evaluation can be a useful analytical tool to study symbolic communication about any gender identity no matter the racial background. The desire for love, control, and overcoming barriers of ones' life, are all components of womanhood in the 21st century. Furthermore, these films suggest that women's' experiences with social struggles influences, but does not, determine their identities. Those struggles pushed them to obtain and maintain mobility and resist dominating forces.

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