

## **New Types of African Heroines in Hollywood: *Black Panther***

### ***Kepelbagaian Baharu Heroin Afrika dalam Hollywood: Black Panther***

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#### **ABSTRACT**

*The release of the much anticipated movie Black Panther in February of 2018, saw the splendour of a predominantly Black cast while the movie also highlighted the strength and empowerment of Black women. The historic notion is that Black women were conditioned to be obedient and submissive but Black Panther contrasts the archaic stereotypes of Black women by introducing women with qualities of the complete opposite. This superhero movie challenges the traditional notion of existing social rules that African women are expected to follow. This indicates a thriving but modest focus on the transformation and changes of social structure among Black women. Thus, this paper draws from an academic exercise that explores the characters of Black women portrayed in Black Panther and how it transforms the traditional Black female roles in Hollywood films.*

**Keywords:** *Film, black female characters, media stereotypes, racial stereotypes, intersectionality*

#### **ABSTRAK**

*Filem Black Panther yang mula ditayangkan pada bulan Februari 2018 telah mempamerkan kemegahan barisan pelakon yang majoritinya adalah etnik Amerika Afrika dan telah menonjolkan kekuatan dan pemerksaan wanita Amerika Afrika. Secara umumnya, perkembangan sejarah telah membentuk satu stereotaip tentang imej wanita Amerika Afrika, iaitu mereka dipercayai mempunyai sifat yang submisif dan patuh kepada lelaki. Namun, gambaran serta mesej yang disampaikan melalui filem Black Panther tentang wanita Amerika Afrika tersebut adalah bertentangan sama sekali. Filem adiwira ini mencabar tanggapan tradisional tentang peraturan sosial yang perlu dipatuhi oleh wanita Amerika Afrika. Hal ini menunjukkan satu gerakan transformasi dan perubahan struktur sosial wanita Amerika Afrika yang sederhana tetapi masih berkembang. Dengan ini, penyelidikan ini menerokai watak-watak yang dilakukan oleh wanita Amerika Afrika daripada sudut akademik dan bagaimana ia mengubah tradisi watak-watak yang dilakukan oleh wanita Amerika Afrika dalam filem-filem Hollywood.*

**Keywords:** *Film, black female characters, media stereotypes, racial stereotypes, intersectionality*

## 1. Introduction

Hollywood was predominantly White before African American actors and actresses began appearing in films. Even then, Black actors and actresses were often portrayed as stereotypical and degrading characters. When the Black actors were given positive roles to play, usually as butlers and servants who are loyal, there was an underlying emphasis that their roles are loyal to their White Masters, while Black women were often portrayed as over-sexualized characters with little to no intelligence (Duke University Libraries, 2018).

Black women constantly face underrepresentation in Hollywood. When it comes to casting of more diverse and complex roles in movies and television, African-American actresses experience difficulties in landing the roles because it does not resemble the stereotypical Black women roles which are usually slaves and they face challenges in finding roles that portray an intelligent Black woman (Harris-Perry, 2011). In television, generally most of the shows are dominated by Caucasian Americans and even the leads of the shows are mostly White. Fortunately, more shows with African American women as lead is on the rise. Television shows such as *Scandal*, *Hawthorne* and *Empire* are some of the few shows that have an African-American woman in the leading roles (Versluys, 2014). Kerry Washington's portrayal of the character *Olivia Pope* in *Scandal* received critical acclaim and her role in the television series highlighted the strong and in command Black woman (The Tillet, 2018).

Today, African actresses in Hollywood continue to break the glass ceiling and achieve new heights. The release of the much anticipated movie *Black Panther* in February of 2018, saw the splendour of a predominantly Black cast (Rackham, 2018) while the movie also highlighted the strength and empowerment of Black women. The historic notion is that Black women were conditioned to be obedient and submissive (Hooks, 1982) but *Black Panther* contrasts the archaic stereotypes of Black women by introducing women with qualities of the complete opposite. This superhero movie challenges the traditional notion of existing social rules that African women are expected to follow. This indicates a thriving but modest focus on the transformation and changes of social structure among Black women. This study will use the book, *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* by Bell Hooks published in 1982, as a framework of feminist theory to study the aspect of feminism in *Black Panther* and to further understand the Black feminist struggle. Therefore, to comprehend the experience of the African-American community, it is vital to have a background of their historical circumstances.

### 1.1 Background of the Study

#### 1.1.1 African-Americans in Hollywood Movies

In Hollywood, the casting of an African-American male, Lincoln Perry, in a silent film titled *In Old Kentucky* made cinema history as he was America's first black movie star (Hurst, 2006). Unfortunately, in that movie, Perry was given the role of Stepin Fetchit. His character was portrayed as a man of little to no intelligence with speech problems. Another mark of cinematic history was made when a Black woman named Nina Mae McKinney was hired to act in the musical film, *Hallelujah* in 1929 (Blackpast, 2008). She was one of the first leading African-American actresses to be on screen.

Further history was made when actress and radio performer Hattie McDaniel became the first African American woman to win an Oscar in 1940, for her supporting role as *Mammy* in 'Gone with the Wind' (Hansen, 2007). Some critics call her character a smart and wise woman while others think that she is seen as wise as long as she still consents to slavery and smart as long as her own life is not as important as the lives of her masters. African-American actresses continued to win awards for on screen performances such as Sidney Poitier for *Lilies of the Field* in 1963 and Oprah Winfrey for *The Colour Purple* in 1985 (Utica Public Library, 2018).

### **1.1.2 *Marvel Cinematic Universe's Black Panther***

In the history of American comic books, The Black Panther was the first Black superhero introduced and the character first made an appearance in July of 1966 in the comic for *Fantastic Four #52* (Mitchell, 2018). The Black Panther was created by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby (McDonald, 2018). The 1960s presented prominent movements such as the Civil Rights Movement and around that time, Martin Luther King Jr. was journeying to the ghettos in Chicago and Los Angeles to speak about the issue of poverty (Mitchell, 2018). Hence, these events were used as inspiration when creating The Black Panther (McNamara, 2018).

Today, Black actresses are continuing to grace Hollywood with their talent and notable works. *Black Panther* is one of the notable films with strong Black female characters. *Black Panther* is the eighteenth film released by Marvel Studios as part of their Marvel Cinematic Universe (Coogler & Cole, 2018). The movie is based on the comic book character of the same name by Marvel Comics. *Black Panther* follows T'Challa who returns to his home of Wakanda after the death of his father who was the King of Wakanda. It was T'Challa's turn to take the throne and to be the rightful king. An old enemy appears and the new king must find allies and embrace the power of Black Panther to defeat his enemies and secure the safety of his people in Wakanda (Marvel, 2018). Wakanda is located in equatorial Africa and the Wakandans were a mainly hunter-gatherer society. According to Marvel, there are four main tribes in Wakanda which are the River tribe, the Mining tribe, the Merchant tribe and the Border tribe. Marvel (2018) also stated that the major languages in Wakanda are Wakandan and Yoruba.

*Black Panther* was directed by Ryan Coogler and the producer was Kevin Feige. The film's lead stars are Chadwick Boseman as T'Challa and Black Panther, alongside Michael B. Jordan as N'Jadaka / Erik "Killmonger" Stevens, Lupita Nyong'o as Nakia, Danai Gurira as Okeye, Martin Freeman as Everett K. Ross, Daniel Kaluuya as W'Kabi, Letitia Wright as Shuri, Winston Duke as M'baku, Angela Bassett as Ramonda, Forest Whitaker as Zuri, and Andy Serkis as Ulysses Klaue.

## **1.2 *Statement of Problem***

It can be said that Hollywood is making a call for diversity and the myriad of movies looking for a diverse cast is growing at a steady pace. Nevertheless, the visibility of Black women in popular culture is still a concern. The rapid growth in the music and film industries, including the ever evolving fashion world poses an obstacle for Black women to remain relevant while keeping up with the challenges of making their existence known.

The lack of visibility for Black women contributes to the issue of inequality experienced by Black women in Hollywood. Viola Davis, an Oscar nominee, noted that Black actresses do not have sufficient roles to try out for and it directly causes low opportunities for them to present

their talents (Thompson, 2013). In award shows, White actresses are nominated more when compared to Black actresses who only receive a few nominations from the variety of categories.

Finally, whitewashing is a concern that stems from low visibility that Black actresses face in Hollywood. Whitewashing happens when acting roles originally meant for people of colour are played by White actors and actresses instead. For example, the film *Mighty Heart* released in the year 2007 was based on a true story of a journalist named Mariane Pearl and her husband Daniel, who is a journalist for The Wall Street Journal, is kidnapped and killed by Pakistani militants. Mariane Pearl is of Afro-Cuban descent and she has curly hair and a dark shade to her skin but her character was played by Angelina Jolie who has no African or Cuban roots (Moreno & Arthur, 2016). *Black Panther* focuses mainly on African roots and the movie also highlights the strength of African women, which is not often portrayed in modern day and mainstream entertainment. Thus, this study intends to explore the characters of Black women portrayed in *Black Panther* and how it highlights Black feminism among women of African descent.

### **1.3 Research Objective**

The following is the research objective for this paper:

- i) To investigate how the *Black Panther* film transforms the traditional Black female roles in Hollywood films.

### **1.4 Research Question**

This paper is guided by the following research question:

- i) What are the ways in which the film *Black Panther* transforms the traditional black female roles in Hollywood films?

### **1.5 Definition of Terms**

The definition of key words from this paper are as below:

1. 'Black women' and 'African women' are terms that are used interchangeably to refer to actresses or characters of African descent, including African-American actresses in Hollywood.

## **2. Literature Review**

This chapter discusses previous studies and works regarding Black women and their representation. Section 2.1 will explore the visibility of African-Americans in popular culture. Section 2.2 will focus on the portrayal of African-American female characters in Hollywood.

### **2.1 Visibility of African-Americans in Popular Culture**

Popular culture, also known as *Pop Culture* is the era that embodies elements of culture such as art, films, literature, fashion and television. A number of researchers found that the upsurge of popular culture was piloted by the middle class citizens during the period of the Industrial Revolution in the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Crossman, 2017). The Caucasian Americans have long dominated the elements of popular culture as they were the most frequently displayed subjects on television and their music was the most publicised upon in the early days. Today, people of the Black community can be seen on fashion catalogues and runways, some are social media icons and they are growing to dominate the cinema industry.

Fashion is an important aspect of popular culture and the Black style has been entwined with introducing fresh looks. According to Time Magazine (White, 2018), the '20s flapper style is indicated to have been introduced by Black youths to accommodate a new style of dance known as Charleston, created by the youths themselves and the '20s flapper style present dresses with lengths reduced to ankles and calves, corsets were removed, while the dresses became looser and freer to be better for dancing.

In addition, music is no stranger to the Black community. Hip hop was introduced to popular culture during the New York dance and party culture in the 1970s (Best & Kellner, 1999). Rap music is known as the voice of hip hop culture and rap is used to voice out the concerns of African-Americans living in tough conditions while also highlighting issues of racial stigma and stereotypes. Best and Kellner emphasize that rap is a form of cultural identity for the African-American community. Today, rap music is utilised for movie soundtracks, television drama, commercials, advertisements and many more. Some of the most iconic Black female singers are the late Whitney Houston, Nina Simone, Beyonce, Rihanna and more.

Dance is an integral part of the African-American community. The radical racial riots during August 1900 contributed to a large number of the Black community to move from lower Manhattan to Harlem for a better settlement (Heinila, 2016). Harlem became a place of entertainment and "jazz dance" was introduced. Jazz dance is collectively a dance that encompasses all kinds of jazz music-related dances. Jazz dance became a signature of Harlem and it was performed in Harlem nightclubs by hired Black women dancers and outside of Harlem in Broadway theatres by African-American performers beginning 1896 (Heinila, 2016). Jazz dance became the staple of Harlem entertainment and it became a vital part of the African-American community. These elements of popular culture bring Black artistes to the forefront by focussing on the rich value of the Black culture and accentuating their popularity. The Internet and the Black Lives Matter movement are credited also credited for the proliferation of Black artistes in popular culture (White, 2018).

## **2.2 *Portrayal of African-American Female Characters in Hollywood***

Initially, Black characters were portrayed stereotypically on radio and even in television shows. According to the study done by Francois (2014), African-American characters were often portrayed as subordinates, less intelligent and more. Francois also mentioned that "Blaxpotation" films, portray Black women in an overly sexual manner and they were also objectified. The study also noted that there were similarities in the characters of Black women were portrayed in Blaxpotation films and stereotypes of African-American women during the slavery era.

Furthermore, Punyanunt-Carter (2008) noted that African-American actors and actresses are commonly portrayed as middle-class workers and inferior. The study also noted that Black actors and actresses have roles that put their characters in a lower social status and usually the characters of the Caucasian actors were more educated. The respondents involved in the study responded that African-Americans in movies and on television were rarely shown as having a job of a higher post when compared to Caucasian characters.

Versluys (2014) stated that the common portrayal of Black female characters in films or television series are "The Mammy", "The Jezebel" and "The Sapphire". Furthermore, Punyanunt-Carter (2008) described that on television, Black actresses are portrayed as "The Low Achiever" by being unambitious and commonly having low level of education compared to the Whites. According to Versulys, The Mammy is a character who was taken away from her

original family and given to a White family to care for them by preparing meals and more, The Jezebel is a character that portrays a black women with an insatiable sexual appetite while The Sapphire is basically a character of an angry Black woman who likes to yell and gets angry frequently.

One of the most prominent portrayal of the Mammy stereotype was done by Louise Beavers as the character of Aunt Delilah in the 1934 film *Imitation of Life*. In the film, the character of Aunt Delilah is a black maid who possesses a pancake recipe which she received through inheritance (Pilgrim, 2000). Then, Aunt Delilah gives the recipe to her employer, Miss Bea. Miss Bea promotes, sells and profits immensely from the pancake recipe. When Miss Bea offered Aunt Delilah a twenty percent share in the pancake business, immediately Aunt Delilah was frightened by the prospect of not working for her boss and having to care on her own. According to Pilgrim (2000), Aunt Delilah strived to ensure the well-being of her White boss's family while neglecting her own family.

In addition, one of the most notable portrayal of the Jezebel character was played by Halle Berry in the 2001 critically acclaimed movie, *Monster's Ball* (Kuck, 2014). In the movie, Halle Berry plays the character of Leticia Musgrove who is a poor waitress and her character is involved in an intense sexual relationship with a white male named Hank Grotowski, played by Billy Bob Thornton (Pilgrim, 2002). Halle Berry won an Oscar for her performance in the movie (Pilgrim, 2002) and the character embodies the Jezebel stereotype because there were scenes where Leticia Musgrove resembled a seductress (Etzi, 2014).

Furthermore, the stereotype of the Sapphire can be seen in the character of Sapphire played by Ernestine Ward from the 1950s television series *Amos and Andy* (Yarbrough & Bennett, 2002). The Sapphire stereotype is groomed through the portrayal of Sapphire, who is the wife of the main character King Fish as malicious and harrowing (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Moreover, the stereotype of the Sapphire originated from the Sapphire character in this series which portrayed the character as adamant and bossy (Ladson-Billings, 2009).

In certain films, Black actresses are also shown as the Low Achiever. Thelma "Butterfly" McQueen was known for her role as Prissy in the 1939 film *Gone with the Wind* (Vilson, 2017). After her role in that film, she played an unintelligent salesperson in another 1939 film titled *The Women* and she was uncredited for that role (Vilson, 2017). Furthermore, Butterfly McQueen also starred in a 1945 movie titled *Mildred Pierce* as a scatter-brained but endearing maid (Vilson, 2017). Butterfly McQueen was continuously offered roles where Black female characters were seen as the low achievers when compared to the White female characters in the films.

Modern day portrayal of Black women in television and films are becoming less and less stereotypical. Oprah Winfrey is one of the most prominent icons of television and she has changed the path of television. CNN (Clifford, 2011) reports that Winfrey has openly discussed about race relations in America on national television through her show, *The Oprah Winfrey Show* as a platform for inspiring conversations and change. Furthermore, shows like *Scandal* portray women of colour in positions of power, which was a rare occurrence for television shows (Deggans, 2018). National Public Radio also credits Shonda Rhimes who is the creator and head writer of *Scandal* for inspiring the increase in shows on television that have Black women in lead roles.

### 3. Methodology

This paper will be analysing the types of female heroines portrayed in the movie *Black Panther*. The book, *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* by bell hooks (1982) will be used as a framework of feminist theory to study the concept of feminism in *Black Panther*, with the present paper focussing on the Black Feminist Theory and Intersectionality.

According to The Women's Forum (Liana, 2018), Black Feminist theory was introduced from the amalgamation of intersectional models derived from discrimination to highlight that the aspects of race and gender should not be perceived as separate entities as they are both correlated. Crenshaw (1989) deciphered the term of intersectionality as a situation where a number of oppressions occur at the same time. She also further added in her essay that Black women endure a combination (racism and sexism) of discrimination. Fundamentally, bell hooks (1989) emphasized that the stereotypes surrounding Black women were derived from the synthesis of racism and sexism.

### **3.1 Black Feminist Theory and Intersectionality**

The International Socialist Review (Smith, 2013) elaborates that 'intersectionality' is not a concept that is abstract but it is more of a depiction of description on how a number of oppressions all occur at the same time. Crenshaw (1989) mentions that Black women face a lot of discrimination that does not fall under the categories of either racism or sexism, but that it is a mix of both.

It goes hand in hand with the content that was written by bell hooks (1982). She writes that Black women had to endure patriarchy, sexism, double standards and more. Hooks further explains that a Black woman was expected to assume a submissive role and be tied down to the domestic environment. While being sheltered in the household, Black women were also expected to carry out menial labour as it was considered a job of lower standards that was designated for them. Not only did they face oppression, but they were also viewed as lower than the White male and female, including being placed at a lower social status than Black men.

### **3.2 The Usual Female Roles Given to African-American Actresses**

#### **3.2.1 Established Roles of African-American Actresses**

According to Versluys (2014), the common stereotypical types of Black female characters in films and television shows are "The Mammy", "The Jezebel" and "The Sapphire". Versluys explains that The Mammy is a character who was taken away from her original family and given to a White family to care for them by preparing meals and more, The Jezebel is a character that portrays a black women with an insatiable sexual appetite while The Sapphire is basically a character of an angry Black woman who likes to yell and gets angry frequently. Punyanunt-Carter (2008) elaborates that Black actresses are portrayed as The Low Achiever on television by being low achievers and having low level of education compared to the Whites. The tables below show the traditional and transformed roles of Black actresses.

TABLE 1. Traditional Roles Given to Black Actresses

No.	Traditional Roles
1.	The Mammy
2.	The Sapphire
3.	The Jezebel
4.	The Low Achiever

TABLE 2. Transformed Roles of Black Women in *Black Panther*

No.	Transformed roles (As seen in <i>Black Panther</i> )
1.	Queen Mother
2.	Advisor to the King/General
3.	Social Activist
4.	Princess and/or Lead Scientist

### 3.2.2 Roles of Female Characters seen in *Black Panther*

Time (2018) states that there are four types of women displayed in the movie which are mother/adviser to the King (played by Angela Basset), princess/lead scientist (played by Letitia Wright), spy/insurrectionist (played by Lupita Nyong'o), and adviser to the King/General of Dora Milaje (played by Danai Gurira). The roles of the Black female characters in *Black Panther* completely dismantles the stereotypical characters offered to Black actresses like "The Mammy", "The Sapphire", "The Jezebel" and "The Low Achiever". The women portrayed in the movie are indeed strong Black women but the manner the female characters are portrayed in the movie defies the negative context of the stereotype.

### 3.3 Black Feminism

According to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (Thistle, 2018), "the purpose of Black Feminism was to develop theory which could adequately address the way race, gender, and class were interconnected in their lives and to take action to stop racist, sexist, and classist discrimination". There are three waves in Black Feminism which are The Abolitionist Movement, The Modern Civil Rights Movement and The Rise of Black Feminist Jurisprudence and Black Women's Health Networks (Taylor, 1998). Taylor writes that the first wave which is The Abolitionist Movement focused on the pinnacle of citizens striving for the Nineteenth Amendment in the year 1920. Next, the second wave, known as The Modern Civil Rights Movement was about Black feminists planning various strategies to earn power and freedom but they were constantly othered by black males and white female activists (Taylor, 1998). The final wave is known as The Rise of Black Feminist Jurisprudence and Black Women's Health Networks. According to Taylor, the third wave was primarily about Black women gaining economic and legal advantages.

In *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* by bell hooks (1982), she writes that Black women had to fight for social equality in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and that Sojourner Truth (one of the earliest Black feminists) faced immense opposition in 1852 when she endeavoured to speak at the second annual convention of the women's rights movement in Akron, Ohio. According to hooks, during that time, White men and women perceived Black women as animals, not fit for the title of woman. hooks further wrote that Sojourner Truth was only allowed to speak on stage only after a White man strongly orated against women receiving equal rights. The reason for his claim was that women were too weak to carry out manual labours. As a response to the claim of the White male, Sojourner Truth advocated resistance against sexism and male chauvinism by sharing her own life experience where she was able to carry out equal workload as a man's. She

survived abuse, torture, rape and she emphasized that she did not only survive the ordeal but she also strived through it triumphantly (hooks, 1989).

In her book, hooks sheds light that 19<sup>th</sup> century Black women cultivated solidarity amongst them because they were constantly isolated by racist White feminists. Black women believed that if they were given the right to vote, they would initiate change in the education system to allow women to pursue all their educational aspirations. hooks emphasized that Black women supported this idea entirely.

### 3.4 Method of Analysis

The theory that would be applied for this paper is the Black Feminist Theory and Intersectionality.

First and foremost, this paper will identify the types of Black women in *Black Panther* by using the Black Feminist Theory as a framework. This study aims to analyse how the stereotypical roles given to Black actresses are refuted by the women in *Black Panther*.

TABLE 3. Key Concepts of the Film and Character Analysis

No.	Stereotypical Roles	Transformed Roles
1.	The Mammy	The Queen Mother
2.	The Sapphire	The General
3.	The Jezebel	The Spy/Insurrectionist
4.	The Low Achiever	The Young Scientist/Intellectual

Firstly, the stereotypical role of The Mammy will be analysed by identifying the traits that make up the stereotype. Then, the role of The Queen Mother will be examined by discerning the qualities of the character. Subsequently, the two roles will be compared and contrasted to illustrate how the role of The Queen Mother transforms the stereotypical role of The Mammy.

Next, the role of The Sapphire will be examined by discerning the characteristics that create the stereotype in tandem with distinguishing the features of The General. Similarly, both of the roles will be measured by their traits that make up the characters to illustrate how the character of The General subverts the role of The Sapphire.

Then, The Jezebel will be dissected for the stereotype's denominators while also determining the characteristics of The Spy/Insurrectionist. Consequently, the two roles will be studied in synchrony to highlight the ways the character of The Spy/Insurrectionist overturns the stereotype of The Jezebel.

Finally, the stereotype of The Low Achiever will be observed by identifying the characteristics that epitomises the role, in addition to highlighting the qualities of The Young Scientist/Intellectual. Thereupon, both of the roles will be scrutinised to pinpoint how the character of The Young Scientist/Intellectual transforms the stereotypical role of The Unintelligent.

Through this process, the study will be able to highlight the significance of the Black Feminist Theory and Intersectionality in the movie *Black Panther* to portray the dismantling of traditional stereotypes and to shed light on the emergence of a new view of the Black female identity

## 4. Findings and Discussion

In this chapter, information will be presented to discuss the key concepts and character analysis of the female heroines in *Black Panther*. There will be compare and contrast elements to analyse traditional roles given to Black actresses and the transformed roles of Black women in *Black Panther*.

#### **4.1 The Mammy Vs. Queen Mother**

There are many films in Hollywood that portray the Mammy stereotype. One of the most prominent Mammy roles is played by Hattie McDaniel in the film 'Gone with the Wind' (Hansen, 2007). In the film, Hattie McDaniel played a Mammy who was incredibly attentive, caring and loyal to the White family that she was working for.

According to Time Magazine (Cooper, 2018), the stereotypical character of the Mammy is a “dutiful caretaker who insured that everyone, white and black, adhered to the tenets of white supremacy”. The character of ‘Queen Mother’ (played by Angela Bassett) in *Black Panther* is also known as Romanda (Busch & Broadnax, 2018).

Coleman (2014) writes that The Mammy archetype is portrayed in the position where they have little to no power. In *Black Panther*, the Queen Mother is portrayed as one of the staunch leaders of Wakanda. Queen Ramonda is one of the advisors to T’Challa and she is a key member in the High Council of Wakanda (Busch & Broadnax, 2018). The role of Queen Mother completely disputes the Mammy character by introducing a matriarch in the position of power.

Additionally, Ladson-Billings (2009) explains that the Mammy is pictured with unsightly physical features and an obese body. In contrast, Queen Mother is portrayed as a regal looking woman with an athletic physique in *Black Panther*. Queen Romanda can be seen to be celebrating her physical features with the multiple intricate and cultural garments that she adorns in the movie.

Moreover, the Mammy stereotype has also been said to be distant and neglectful of her children while being overly courteous to the Whites (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Queen Mother is the complete opposite because she cares immensely for her children, T’Challa and Shuri. Before T’Challa’s coronation, Queen Romanda says that she is proud that her son is about take on the mantle of king. In another scene of the movie, the queen consoles her daughter, Shuri when she tearfully mourns not being able to properly bury her deceased brother. Queen Mother immediately comforts Shuri even though she is just as upset. This shows that the queen genuinely loves and cares for her children.

The Mammy archetype is also portrayed to be non-threatening to White people and powerless in general (Love, 2014). In *Black Panther*, Queen Mother is shown to be very capable when it comes to protecting her family or herself. In the scene where she and Shuri were caught by surprise when Nakia and Everett Ross sneaked up behind them, the queen almost instinctively aimed a sharp weapon to where she felt them approaching. This scene displayed the queen’s quick reflexes and sheds light that the queen has had some experience with self-defence.

#### **4.2 The Sapphire Vs. The General**

According to Ladson-Billings (2009), the stereotype of the Sapphire was perpetuated through the character of Sapphire (played by Ernestine Ward) from the television show *Amos and Andy*. In the television show, Sapphire is the wife of the show’s primary character known as King Fish (Ladson-Billings, 2009). The character of Sapphire in the series is portrayed as a hostile, aggressive, berating character whom often debilitates her husband (Grayman, 2005).

According to Grayman (2005), the stereotype of the Sapphire is often times related to another stereotype known as the Angry Black Woman. In addition, the Angry Black Woman stereotype has a few traits which claims that Black females are aggressive, illogical and fatalistic regardless of the situations (Ashley, 2014). Grayman writes that this correlation happens frequently because Black women tend to question in a straight forward and firm manner. Grayman adds that this phenomenon is more than often portrayed in a warped manner in the media.

In contrast, the character of the General also known as Okoye (played by Danai Gurira) in *Black Panther*, is involved in multiple confrontations. One of the most notable confrontation scenes that Okoye is involved in involves her romantic interest, W'kabi in the final battle scene of the film. In the scene, Okoye can be seen holding a spear aiming at W'kabi and her facial expression showed resolute determination rather than irrational anger. Furthermore, the stereotypes of the Sapphire and the Angry Black Woman are also shown as mean, hostile and uncontrollable (Malveaux, 1989; Morgan & Bennett, 2006). On the contrary, also in the final battle scene, Okoye clearly displays mercy and demands for W'kabi to drop his weapons. This clearly emphasizes that Okoye acts on a moral code and it shows that Okoye is not uncontrollable. Furthermore, in the scene of the film where the antagonist, known as Killmonger or N'Jadaka plans to wage war on a few countries, Okoye, as The General advises against it by emphasizing that Wakanda has survived by engaging in fights when it was only necessary. This further highlights that war and aggression are not Okoye's preference.

Furthermore, Malveaux (1989) and Morgan & Bennett (2006) write that the Sapphire stereotype frequently shows Black female characters as undesirable and unfeminine. In *Black Panther*, Okoye is in an established relationship with her romantic interest, W'kabi. The archaic notion that shows Black female characters as undesirable is clearly disputed in the film because Okoye was in a romantic relationship with W'kabi. The stereotype of the Sapphire character being unfeminine is subverted by Okoye in the movie. In the scene where T'Challa, Nakia and Okoye visit a casino bar in South Korea, Okoye can be seen wearing a red dress along with a wig. Hence, that scene highlights that Okoye can be feminine when the situation deems it necessary.

Grayman (2005) noted that the Sapphire stereotype is sometimes portrayed as being strenuous and tirelessly resistant which acts as an alternative to protect themselves. On the other hand, in *Black Panther*, Okoye is only resistant when the situation requires her to be. For example, upon Killmonger gaining power of the throne, Okoye continues to stay loyal to the King because as The General, it is her duty to remain loyal to the throne, regardless of who sits upon it. She only resists against Killmonger when she realises that T'Challa is still alive which means that T'Challa can still stake a claim on the throne, having not lost or yielded in the ritual combat against Killmonger.

### **4.3 The Jezebel Vs. The Spy/Insurrectionist**

Ladson-Billings (2009) highlights that Halle Berry is one of the most notable examples of Black actresses who played the Jezebel role. In the film *Monster's Ball*, Halle Berry plays the character Leticia Musgrove, a poor waitress who is involved in a sexual relationship with a Caucasian man, named Hank Grotowski (played by Billy Bob Thornton) who supervised the execution of her husband (Pilgrim, 2002). According to Etzi (2014), the character of Leticia Musgrove symbolises the Jezebel stereotype because the character is portrayed as a seductress in a number of scenes in the movie. The Jezebel character is most often described as having intense and

insatiable sexual desires (Weaver Jr., 2016) while the one of the most prominent traits that the Jezebel is associated with is being a seductress (Ladson-Billings, 2009).

Pilgrim (2002) writes that The Jezebel stereotype is perpetuated to be quintessentially promiscuous. In contrast, the character of Nakia (played by Lupita Nyong'o) in *Black Panther* is fiercely loyal to her romantic interest T'Challa. The film contains a scene where T'Challa is presumed to be death after Killmonger defeats him in battle by throwing him off the cliff of the waterfall. Furthermore, Nakia intensely professes to Okoye that she loves T'Challa even if he was dead when Okoye insists her loyalty to the throne regardless who sits upon it. Her loyalty to T'Challa is further explored when T'Challa is rescued and brought to the Jabari tribe. Nakia stays by T'Challa's side and it was her voice that brought him back from unconsciousness. Nakia's faithfulness to T'Challa is inarguably strengthened throughout the entire movie as she continued fighting by his side.

According to Brown (2015), the traits of the Jezebel stereotype includes superficial interests, being inconsiderate and self-centred. On the contrary, the character of Nakia cares deeply for social causes. Even in one of the earliest scenes of *Black Panther*, Nakia is involved in a rescue mission. She was willing to risk her life by going undercover as one of the refugees in order to save the other refugees who are kidnapped. Furthermore, Nakia frequently encourages T'Challa to share Wakanda's resources to the rest of the world so that they can help those in need.

Pilgrim (2002) writes that one of the most popular tropes for the Jezebel stereotype is "physically attractive and aggressive rebels, willing and able to gain revenge against corrupt officials, drug dealers, and violent criminals". Pilgrim adds that most of these characters tend to use their sexual appeal to lure the person that they wish to seek revenge from. In contrast, Nakia confronts Killmonger and engages in a battle with him, clad in an armour suit. The armour suit offered Nakia full coverage and protection. Contrary to the popular tropes offered to the Jezebel stereotypes, Nakia did not use any sexual appeal when confronting Killmonger.

#### **4.4 The Low Achiever Vs. The Young Scientist/Intellectual**

Thelma "Butterfly" McQueen was one of the most prominent Black female actors. Among the characters she played, is the character of Prissy who is a housemaid in the film *Mildred Pierce* (Vilson, 2017). In the movie, Butterfly McQueen starred as an endearing but unintelligent housemaid (Vilson, 2017). In another movie called *The Women* (1939), Butterfly McQueen played an uncredited role as an unintelligent salesperson (Vilson, 2017). According to Terry (2018), Black women are found to be rarely the ones who hold professional positions, high-ranking jobs and that those are the missing representations in today's popular culture. Green (1998) adds that the current stereotype that is perpetuated towards Black women are that they are lazy.

Punyanunt-Carter (2008) mentions that Black females are seen as low achievers in the media as compared to White female characters. In *Black Panther*, Shuri (played by Letitia Wright) is shown as a character who is immensely intelligent for her age and that completely contradicts the notion that Black female characters are low achievers. Due to her young age, Shuri also faced criticism from M'Baku (the leader of the Jabari tribe). M'Baku voiced out his distaste that a young child is overseeing the technological advancements of Wakanda. Regardless of M'Baku's criticisms, Shuri continues to further improve the technology of Wakanda.

According to Baptiste-Fernandez & Greenberg, Black actors and actresses on television are rarely shown as being in a professional job position or a managerial position. Black males

and females were usually portrayed as having blue-collar jobs such as servants, a musician and a line cook (Seggar & Wheeler, 1973). On the contrary, Shuri is shown as being in charge of the Science and Information Exchange of the first Wakandan Outreach Centre in the film. Furthermore, the film also highlights that Shuri has experience and knowledge in the medical field, especially when she is able to heal Agent Everett Ross' spine injury. In addition, it can also clearly be seen in the movie that Shuri is also involved in the architecture and engineering field, particularly in the scene where she is explaining to Agent Everett Ross about how she made the magnetic trains in Wakanda function more efficiently by utilising the sonic stabilizers.

Cosby (1994) identified that in the media, Black males and females are stereotypically portrayed as uneducated, comical and untrained. In addition, the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights (1977) discerned that Black characters are often shown as unintelligent and inferior in the media. On the other hand, *Black Panther* highlights the intelligence of Shuri. Shuri is T'Challa's sister and one of the brilliant young minds of Wakanda. Moreover, Shuri is entrusted with the responsibility of overseeing Wakanda's technological advancements. The film does not shy away from the fact that a young Black female could possibly be intelligent than an average person. Instead, the movie celebrates the brilliance of Shuri by showcasing it in the forefront. Furthermore, Shuri makes frequent and regular updates to existing technology in Wakanda for more improvement. She is even trusted to design the new Black Panther suit for T'Challa which is a better version than T'Challa's older design.

## 5. Conclusion

The movie of *Black Panther* embraced and portrayed Black culture in all its glory, capturing history and retelling it in a modern setting. *Black Panther* contradicts tradition by portraying characters of Black women that are intelligent, fierce, loyal, socially aware and politically powerful. This movie questions the perceived stereotypes that Black female characters are portrayed as by introducing strong and whole-rounded female characters. Based on the film, the character of Queen Mother transforms the stereotype of The Mammy, Okoye subverts the stereotype of The Sapphire, Nakia metamorphoses the stereotype of The Jezebel and Shuri completely redefines the stereotype of The Low Achiever. *Black Panther* paves a new path in the mainstream media by introducing empowering Black female characters that secedes from the traditional stereotypical roles.

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