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Black Women Representation in Blaxploitation Cinema (1970-1974): Black Femininity in Pam Grier's Characters *Foxy Brown* and *Coffy*

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Dedication

To my loving parents who believe in me, my lively and noisy siblings who fill my life with energy, my lovely older sister who motivates me and my supportive friends Amina, Fatiha, Jiwon, Oumaima and Hadjer who constantly help me get through rough times; all of whom

I love and cherish. Thank you!

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Abstract

The representation of black women in Blaxploitation cinema has been subject to debate among film historians and critics ever since the 1970s. Before the rise of Blaxploitation, black women were only casted in supporting roles; however, the case changed after the emergence of the genre owing to the progress of the social, political and cultural climate for the black community. Black women were granted more diverse roles as protagonists rather than mere minor characters. Nevertheless, the genre was questioned for the stereotypical manner in which it portrayed African American women, and scholars doubted the contribution of these films to the betterment of black women's representation in Hollywood. This research aims to inspect the nature of black female representation in Blaxploitation cinema through the analysis of two landmark films *Coffy* (1973) and *Foxy Brown* (1974). Furthermore, it seeks to identify the major stereotypes of black femininity that the films embody and defy. It also tries to recognize the contribution these films provided for African American women in the film industry. Thus, this research follows an interpretive method in the sense that it deals with social and human experience of a specific group. Moreover, the research relies on content analysis of the chosen films and their relevant primary and secondary sources; it also employs the black feminist, womanist and film theories. The research finds that Blaxploitation films excessively perpetuate degrading stereotypes of black femininity; however, they did contribute in building empowered black female characters on screen.

Keywords: Blaxploitation, Black Femininity, Stereotypes.

List of Abbreviations and Acronyms

NBFO: National Black Feminist Organization

NAACP: The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People

MIA: The Montgomery Improvement Association

CAB: Coalition against Blaxploitation

AIP: American International Pictures

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General Introduction

Ever since the emergence of the motion picture industry in America, African Americans were granted little to no representation. The roles of Black individuals were often performed by “Blackface” actors and actresses; whom assisted in illustrating a degrading image of African Americans. Blacks in the period preceding the civil rights movement have been perceived as inferior to the white majority in America; hence, they have been depicted as such in cinema. Specifically, African American women suffered the misfortune of facing repercussions of film portrayed stereotypes.

However, following the rise of the civil rights movement in the 1950’s which later bred the Black Power movement, African Americans sought Alterations not only on the level of social justice, but also on the perception of the black culture and community in all sectors including film industry. Moreover, since mainstream feminism of the second wave was not quite satisfactory for black women who felt the alienation of their experiences by the movement, African American women constructed Black Feminism which functioned as a combat against both racism and sexism; while the second-wave feminism was dominated by white women and the black power movement was dominated by black men. As black women and men voiced their discontent regarding discrimination and segregation, they reinforced their sense of black pride and identity; therefore, they demanded accurate representation within society and subsequently film production.

In 1970, a new cinematic genre emerged as an attempt to appeal to black audience; since many people viewed it as a tool for white film corporations to exploit black film audience, it was named “Blaxploitation”. Nevertheless, Blaxploitation films served as a step forward in the improvement of African American representation in the motion picture

industry regardless of its flaws. These films ventured to incorporate new black ideals such as “Black Power” and provide an all black production revolving around an African American protagonist; usually had a black director, producer, and soundtrack creator. However, in spite of the powerful image given to black women by Blaxploitation, it still showcased certain misconceptions often believed about them.

The proposed research attempts to discuss the representation of African American women in Blaxploitation film era (1970-1974). It tackles the race and gender stereotypes that targeted black women portrayed in characters played by Pam Grier in landmark films “*Coffy*” (1973) and “*Foxy Brown*” (1974). It concentrates on the concept of black femininity and the way it is depicted in this film genre; thus, this research intends to provide an answer for the research question below:

How were Black women represented in the Blaxploitation genre? This question provokes three subsidiary questions:

1. How do Blaxploitation films embody stereotypes of Black Femininity?
2. How do Blaxploitation films challenge stereotypes of Black Femininity?
3. What is the contribution of Blaxploitation films to Black women representation in Hollywood?

This research aims to provide an overall image of the nature of female representation in the Blaxploitation cinema; furthermore, it serves as an endeavor to identify stereotypes of black femininity both perpetuated and opposed within this genre. Finally, it seeks to highlight the essence of contribution that Blaxploitation provided for Afro-American women representation in the Hollywood industry.

An insight on this film genre is important in shedding light on the roots of African American representation in cinema, since it marks the stepping stone for the evolution of

Black film. Moreover, modern cinematic works are inspired by Blaxploitation features; hence, providing a detailed background will help students interested in American studies and African American culture to recognize the significance of the genre in black film history. More importantly, the focus on the representation of Black women in particular aids in relating the experience of Afro-American women as part of two oppressed groups and the manner by which these experiences are witnessed in their film portrayal.

This research will base upon the interpretive method; considering that it deals with the social context and human experience of a specific group. Under this light, it will rely on the observation and content analysis of the films chosen; mainly through a feminist lens and following an analytical approach. Furthermore, it will analyze existing literature relevant to the research topic and variables and provide an account of critics' perspectives of the analyzed films. Since the research topic handles Black Women representation in film, it requires the involvement of several theories which include Black Feminism and Womanism and Film Theory. Finally, the research follows the MLA eighth edition style.

This study has potential limitations. First, with the choice of two major films, the research fails to analyze every aspect relevant to the problem in detail, considering that it requires much more time and effort. Furthermore, the research neglects the thorough identification of stereotypes challenged by Blaxploitation and fails to highlight more than one contribution of the genre to female representation due to the lack of the adequate professional perspectives on the matter. Thus, these flaws can constitute the base of a future extended research.

Blaxploitation Cinema has been an interest for various film historians and professors; however, very few make the connection between female representation and this genre of films. Various scholars condemn the genre for its negative portrayal of black women;

whereas, others believe that the empowerment of women in these films overshadows the degrading stereotypes employed in it.

Ed Guerrero (1993) compares the Hollywood industry to a plantation growing films rather than cotton. That is, African Americans are treated the same in cinema as they are in real life. He accuses the industry of degrading the black image through the perpetuation of myths and stereotypes. He highlighted the struggle of the NAACP in attempting to halt these productions. Subsequently, he recognizes the role of new African American perspectives bred by the civil rights movement in launching Blaxploitation. Later, Novonty Lawrence's *Blaxploitation film of the 1970's* (2007) affirms Guerrero's point and additionally delves further into analyzing Blaxploitation cinema. Furthermore, Yvonne D. Sims (2006) considers film as powerful tool to reform cultural perceptions of certain groups which in turn would reshape particular concepts regarding Afro-American women. She dedicates a chapter of her work to the examination of Pam Grier's works. Stephane Dunn (2008) as well, emphasizes racial and gender power in Blaxploitation film with a focus on women roles as both protagonists and side characters.

The presented research is divided to three sections; the first being theoretical, the second historical and the third being analytical. The first part is a theoretical and a conceptual framework that aims to provide a detailed account of the feminist theory and movement, its history and its relation to gender studies. Additionally, the first chapter defines black feminism as well as womanism and highlights its roots. The second chapter is a historical overview of black people's rise from slavery to black power. This part discusses the status of people of color in the American society from slavery to the rise of full rights demanding movements. Furthermore, it emphasizes the position of black people in cinema, specifically women; therefore, it delves into stereotypes related to black womanhood. The

third chapter is dedicated to the Blaxploitation genre and its most iconic female figure Pam Grier. This section analyzes the two case study films *Coffy* and *Foxy Brown* and studies the representation of black femininity in them.

Chapter One: Feminism Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

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1. Introduction

This chapter is an attempt to provide a fixed theoretical and conceptual account about Feminism upon which the coming chapters will base. Its aim is to highlight the major characteristics of relevant theories and their related concepts, precisely Feminism and womanism. Considering that the Blaxploitation era flourished in the period of social justice demands on various levels, it is only fair to shed light on the contribution of feminist thought and theory in shaping the genre. Feminism and the feminist theory provide for the collectivity of women to seek their respectable spot within the male-centric world. Hence, it enhances the representation of women in a myriad of sectors and alters the perspective of the woman as a weak and inferior secondary sex.

Inevitably, this chapter gives an overall view of gender studies as the umbrella field for Feminism. It gives a proper definition of the term gender and discusses the relationship between gender and feminist theory. Furthermore, it is important to recall the history of Feminism and its waves, as well as introduce its subfields. Since the research tackles the representation of Black Women in cinema, this chapter takes into account the experience of African American women with Feminism; thus Black Feminism and womanism. Consequently, major figures of the movement such as Bell Hooks and Alice walker are included. To analyze the films chosen for this research, referring to film theory is significant. Therefore, this chapter briefly discusses film theory in relation to Feminism and Black women.

2. Feminist Movement and Theory

The emergence of Feminism followed the collective resolution of women to fight the patriarchal social system. Women were and still are, to this day, perceived as inferior to men. They are given little to no control over their lives and bodies. Therefore, the feminist movement fundamentally aims to emancipate women from the male-dominated public life. Primarily, Feminism promotes equal rights and opportunities for women like men. It seeks to eliminate the political, economic, and social inequalities of the sexes. However, currently, the term feminism is misunderstood by a vast majority as an advocacy for women's superiority. Hence, it will mutilate the long-established rules of relationships, culture, power, the sacred bond of marriage and the organized society. (Caprino)

To proceed into the topic of Feminism and its history, an adequate description of the term is due. Nevertheless, understanding feminist ideas and principles requires the tolerance of a broad range of perspectives, which cannot be crammed into one basic definition. The term itself is subject to time, space and the emergence of new premises. Still, western Feminism serves as a mold that shapes the general study of women's rights; since it is established upon the idea of women's emancipation. (Schrupp V)

Feminism represents the first out of three subsidiary branches discussed under the comprehensive field of "Gender Studies". Generally, Feminism refers to the set of social, political and ideological campaigns that advocate for the overall equal rights for all people disregarding their affiliations, whether its gender, sexuality, race, culture, or religion. Feminism represents an attempt to overthrow the patriarchal social apparatus and aims to "de-centralize" the man's habit of thought. (Cole)

The feminist theory started as a criticism of what is conventional within societies, which is the universal domination and representation of man. The theory illustrates a reaction to

the hierarchal nature of civilizations. It poses a criticism for patriarchy, misogyny and sexism. Feminists argue that women are marginalized as a consequence of the prejudice of masculine superiority. They criticize the man-designed social system, which is established upon their perspectives and for their benefit. While men bathe in the privileges resulting from their self-proclaimed authority, women struggle to be integrated as full members of their society, liberated from shackles of orthodox conventions and lack of education. (Cole)

The situation of women and the birth of patriarchy is a result of historical development which rendered women as an object of men's desires. The first forms of coded knowledge comprise the texts of ancient civilizations; namely the Greeks and Romans, which illustrate the nature of their patriarchal social systems. According to Bev Thiele, feminists argue that it is men who write social and political theory about men and for men (Beasley 16). Hence, the commonly known philosophical and political ideas imported from these civilizations are chiefly ideas of men. Moreover, ancient texts coded by men reprimand women to remain submissive to men, to maintain silence, to attend to their domestic duties obediently, and to refrain from presenting any demands. To exemplify, Greek tragedian Sophocles states, "*A woman should be seen, not heard,*" this further emphasizes the growth of patriarchy throughout history. (Schrupp 1, 3-4)

Religion contributed to degrading women as well; for instance, the church was strictly a male organization. Consequently, this led to the demonstration of what can be considered the earliest form of Feminism. Women demonstrated their discontent with the hierarchy of the church; they believed that the male established religious doctrines cannot validate women. Furthermore, starting from the thirteenth century, women revealed an intense interest in social, community life. They sought a life away from the conventional domestic duties assigned to women by the agency of men. However, the efforts of these progressive

women were met with persecution by the church, whereas some survived and continued to preach new ideals befitting of women. Eventually, some of these women were canonized, such as the Spanish abbess Teresa of Ávila. This illustrates the world's perception of feminism, as some feminist ideas are celebrated while others are discredited. (Schrupp 5-6, 8)

Feminist theory can be described as a critique of what is universalized as the center (men) and the margin (women). It denounces the established norms by focusing on them. Feminism and the remaining Gender Studies subfields display a commitment to social reform (Beasley 17). Fundamentally, Feminism, according to Bell Hooks (VIII), is a movement to abolish sexism and sexist practices and beliefs. She refers to patriarchy as institutionalized sexism used to overpower and dominate women. Thus, she suggests that to comprehend Feminism, one must know the definition of sexism fully.

2.1. Definition of Sexism

Sexism is a term that refers to the theory, idea, or belief that the male superiority over women justifies discrimination regardless of its conscious or unconscious adoption. Sexism, by fair means, represents the sex equivalent of racism to which both are used as a medium of domination. Octavia Butler, an African American science fiction author, compares such hierarchical attitudes to a “Peck Order” on which she blames the international shared misery. The term was coined during the Women's Liberation Movement in the 1960s, describing the collective oppressive behavior towards women within human society. (Napikoski)

Institutionalized sexism indicates the conscious or unconscious display of discrimination towards women. The conventional practices, along with specific laws and

policies, often assist the reinforcement of such inequality between men and women. However, this attitude is not only common among men; women can be accomplices in oppression against themselves by adopting the belief that men deserve having power and domination over women. On this situation Erica Jong comments: *"Sexism kind of predisposes us to see men's work as more important than women's, and it is a problem, I guess, as writers, we have to change."* (qtd. in Napikoski)

Bell Hooks (1-2) argues that it is common knowledge for feminists that not so many people understand the premise of sexism, or assume it is not a major problem. Thus, it breeds people's miscomprehension of feminism as women's venture to be men. Furthermore, she notes that religion plays a significant role in influencing the collective perspective of women being domestic beings fit for the household.

This form of systemized discriminatory attitudes renders women as brainwashed obedient beings. It programs them to conform to the widespread patriarchal beliefs; not only that, but it also convinces them that it is the rightful lifestyle that everyone must abide to. Furthermore, it draws certain boundaries and sets specific roles that are advertised as obligatory for both sexes, which pose a disadvantage to women. In other words, it fortifies the social construction of sexed divisions, which are known as Gender Roles. Hence, it provides for the agency of one sex over the other, often male over female. According to feminists, such as Robin Morgan, the oppression of women by men is a consequence of the latter's fear or jealousy of the former; as women pose a threat to men. Christine de Pizan's acclaim in *"The City of Ladies"* can affirm the previous claim: *"They who defame women are small spirits. They have encountered so many women ranking above them in terms of wisdom and gentility that their reaction is to be sulky and indignant. And because of this Grudge, they speak ill of women."* (qtd.in Schrupp, 10). Hence, De Pizan believes that

misogyny is primarily the result of the threatened male ego. Men who come across women who empower them assume that it is a threat to their masculinity; therefore, they verbally harass women to maintain their status of power.

3. Feminism in Relation to Gender Studies

Feminism, along with masculinity and sexuality studies, forms the field of gender studies. Feminist thought inspired thinkers, theorists, and researchers such as Chris Beasley and Jane Pilcher to explore the nature of power distribution within society. Academically, the study of gender is relatively new; however, the term itself was contrasted with sex by anthropologists, sociologists and psychologists as early as 1945. It was popularized by feminist writings in the 1970s from which its academic study emerged. Nevertheless, feminists did not initiate the distinction between sex and gender. (Debuk)

To delve into the field of gender studies and its subsidiary fields, it should be necessary to establish an appropriate definition of the term 'Gender.' Gender indicates the social construction of divisions among people based on sex. This division often establishes a system of social order in which a specific category labeled under the umbrella of 'gender' is more or less discriminated. Generally, the term involves two binary opposing categories, which are men and women. However, such division does not indicate a mere separation of names; it also attributes specific and distinct social roles and practices for each side. Hence, men are usually associated with 'public life,' and women are associated with 'domestic life,' despite their contribution to both. Additionally, this categorization often implies the negativity of one sex and the positivity of the other. (Beasley 11-12)

Gender theorists investigate the influence of binary comprehension of masculinity and femininity in forming one's perception of gender. They tackle the fact that this sexed

categorization of human beings disadvantages one side of the gender equation, which in most cases, is women. Anne Cranny-Francis exemplifies the negative connotation of femininity resulting from sexed categorization using Aristotle's Pythagorean Table. Aristotle juxtaposes two sets of nouns in which one set carries a negative connotation and the other a positive one. Hence, he creates, in a way, a set of binary oppositions where the positive, strong and courageous male is opposite to the negative, weak and cautious female. Cranny-Francis continues to examine the mainstream thought in modern society; consequently, she concludes that the ancient Greek Philosophy is still adopted centuries later. She condemns the influence of gendering on all the realms of human life, including language, for a large portion of feminine nouns often carry negative connotations. (Cranny-Francis 1)

4. History of Feminism

The term “Feminism” stems from the French word “féminisme”, which refers to the medical description of the male body feminization or the masculine attributes of a woman. (Pilcher et al. 48) However, the first appearance of the term in the sphere of women liberation is in letters from Dutch feminist Mina Kruseman to French writer Alexander Dumas. After that, the expression started being related to individuals concerned with the alteration of women's social and political position. However, although the term began circulating in the late nineteenth century, earlier women rights activists such as Mary Wollstonecraft were acknowledged as feminists for their arguments displayed modern feminist tendencies. (48)

Historically, the feminist movement is divided into three phases, labeled as “waves”, which first commenced in the nineteenth century. However, one can trace criticism of

patriarchal social systems in earlier periods; such critiques appeared as early as the middle ages. Early feminist activists such as French philosopher Marie de Gournay, English writer Mary Wollstonecraft and French artist Olympe de Gouges demonstrated individual efforts to preach women's rights. Nevertheless, the rise of organized feminist conventions and movements only occurred in the mid-nineteenth century. The three waves outline modern Feminism, while the possibility of characterizing the fourth wave is debatable. (Schrupp 16-17)

4.1.First Wave of Feminism

In the middle of the nineteenth century, the first feminist campaign in the United States was born under the leadership of activists Lucrezia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. A decent number of women and even men supported the so-called Seneca Falls Convention, which embraced a "Declaration of Rights and Sentiments" and rejected men's monopoly of power. Subsequently, this sparked a series of movements not only in America but even in Europe, validating the concept of feminism. This phase of the movement emphasized three main demands, which comprise Suffrage right, education and employment. (25-27)

The first wave of feminism, often referred to as modernist, liberationist, and emancipatory, took place from the mid-nineteenth century to the early twentieth century. It criticized the nineteenth century Liberalism, which emphasized the notion of individual freedom. Nonetheless, the proclamation proved to be restricted to men only while women were excluded. Consequently, the first wave activists denounced the lack of universality within this notion and promoted the inclusion of women as full citizens of the liberal capitalist society. Liberalism pontificated the human freedom to own property, vote and own wealth. However, women were not permitted access to such freedom, for they were

regarded as irrational. These discriminatory claims were the center of criticism by liberal feminists. (Beasley 18)

4.2. Second Wave Feminism

Amidst the rise of the civil rights movement and the growth of awareness among minority groups, this new phase of feminism emerged in the 1960s and 1970s and lasted till the 90s. While the first wave rallied to grant women the franchise right, second-wave feminism aimed to liberate women from the patriarchal society. Although the second wave had an emancipatory inclination just like the first one, it took a radical direction. (Pilcher et al. 144)

The emphasis in this wave was on what Pilcher et al. described as the ideological positioning of women. Issues like sexuality and reproduction rights came into view. Significantly, it focused on the female body and its representation. Writers and activists focused more on gender categorization and differences. Simone De Beauvoir, whose book *The Second Sex* represents a crucial document for modern feminists, exclaims that “**One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman**” (qtd. in 144), which summarizes the mainstream thought within the movement. Hence, feminists fantasized about a world where the ideological socially constructed roles assigned to men and women are abolished. However, the movement was radicalized when supporters of the rising New Left and other political movements joined the trend. (145)

The second wave was more than just an escalation of radical feminism; it also witnessed changes in the tenets of Liberal and Marxist feminism. Consequently, expressions similar to “sexual politics” and “The Personal is Political” were frequently and increasingly used. (Pilcher et al. 146) Besides, although the second wave of feminism carried a negative

connotation and was dismissed by the media as man-hating propaganda, it still outlined a plan for feminist thought and designed new principles for the movement. (145, 146) Professor Linda Nicholson says about the era: "*Something happened in the 1960s in ways of thinking about gender that continues to shape public and private life.*" (qtd. in 147). Significantly, Nicholson acknowledges the impact of the social rights movements in the 1960s on society, specifically in regards to women's rights.

4.3. Third Wave Feminism

After the second wave fractured into various groups, feminism started to lose its accumulated, organized power. Additionally, counter-movements of the second wave became a trend among them is post-feminism, which denounced the necessity of feminism since equal rights were attained. Subsequently, the third wave emerged in the mid-1990s to redefine feminist principles and overthrow sexist, patriarchal perceptions. The movement was initiated by Rebecca Walker, daughter of novelist Alice Walker, in a plea she wrote in 1992 which reads:

I write this as a plea to all women, especially the women of my generation: Let this dismissal of a woman's experience move you to anger. Turn that outrage into political power. Do not vote for them unless they work for us. Do not have sex with them, do not break bread with them, do not nurture them if they don't prioritize our freedom to control our bodies and our lives. I am not a postfeminism feminist. I am the Third Wave. (qtd. in Schrupp 78)

The movement identified what the first wave lacked. Third Wavers argued that the second wave was restricted by its exclusivity to white, middle-class women. They disagreed with its alienation of ordinary and minority women, as well as its negligence of sexuality.

The uniqueness of the third wave lies in the fact that women affiliated with it are educated and accustomed to feminism and women studies. Additionally, popular culture was integrated into this phase's feminism, especially in music, literature, television and film. Moreover, some post-feminists, whose perspectives fit into the third wave agenda, promoted the encouragement of women to abandon their passivity towards oppression and fight their way through patriarchy. Naomi Wolf, an American progressive feminist, labeled the dominant thought in the second wave as "victim feminism." (Pilcher 169, 170)

5. Black Feminism in the United States

The representation of African American women within feminism went through two landmark movements, the first being the abolitionist movement simultaneously with the first wave, and the second being the civil rights movement in the 1960s. During these periods, African American women developed self-awareness and sought to improve their situation and empower themselves. However, black women could not establish a sense of belonging within the white organized feminist campaigns or the male-dominated black liberation movements. Thus, their situation called for the formation of an abstract pattern that specifies social, economic, and political issues related to black people and women. This trend is now called "Black Feminism". (Taylor 18)

5.1. History of Black Feminism

In 1848, the Seneca Falls Convention was the first major assembly of women's rights supporters. Nonetheless, it also marked the first African American presence within a white gathering. Frederick Douglass, an African American civil rights activist, displayed his support for women's right for suffrage. Furthermore, the 1851 US Women Conference

witnessed Sojourner Truth's legendary speech *Ain't I a Woman*; where she refuted the conception of woman as the weaker sex (Schrupp 26, 29). Truth said:

The man over there said that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere... and ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? (qtd. in 30)

Sojourner Truth is often regarded as the Godmother of black feminism. She utilized her own experience as a former slave to affirm the idea that women are neither inferior nor weak. Besides, she addressed the intersectionality of sexism and racism, which jeopardizes black women's lives. Moreover, Truth inspired other black women whose political consciousness urged them to voice their views. Unfortunately, the contribution of black women to the early American feminist movements was disregarded and overlooked by historians and white scholars, including Barbara Berg, June Sochen and Sheila Rowbotham. (Hooks; *Ain't I* 215-216)

During the second wave, African American women sought to devise plans for emancipation and power acquisition. However, they received no support, neither from white feminists nor from black male liberationists. A major example is the case of Shirley Chisholm, who, in 1968, became the first black woman elected to the US congress. Chisholm ran for presidency in 1972; nevertheless, she received little to no support from white female activists. Likewise, the black male liberationists had no respect for her candidacy; they argued that she would be biased towards issues of women, which would conflict with those of race. (Taylor 19)

Black feminism emerged as a reaction to the sexism in the Black power movement and racism in the second wave of feminism. It started with the establishment of the National

Black Feminist Organization (NBFO). Founded by Margaret Sloan, who stated that the members were limited to thirty women of color, yet they still called themselves a national organization. Eventually, the organization grew, and more black women joined the trend. In 1973, NBFO organized its first conference with the attendance of over two hundred and fifty women. (20)

Still, Black feminism failed to attract as many black women. First, black women struggled with many issues and were not able to provide support for the NBFO. Additionally, feminism during the 1970s had a negative connotation; for instance, they believed that feminism would only benefit white women. Additionally, myths about feminism were planted to diverse black women from their freedom, including ideas such as black women are already liberated, and they should focus more on race issues, as well as deeming feminism as mere man-hating. It was until the third wave that Black feminism witnessed the rise of the so-called jurisprudence and put forward critiques of legal theory. Hence, it contributed to relating governmental laws to both race and gender. (20, 21)

5.2. The Rise of Womanism

During the beginning of the third wave, black women demonstrated a strong rejection towards identifying as black feminists. They viewed that feminism was scarred with elitist and racist tendencies. However, many of them were ready to adopt “Womanism”. The term womanism is coined by the African American novelist Alice Walker in her work *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*. (Taylor 26) A womanist is a feminist of color who appreciates women's culture, their emotional flexibility, and their survival ability. Also, it advocates the collectivity of people, both male and female. Walker declares that “*womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender*”, signifying that womanism gives

feminism the color it lacked. According to Barkley Brown, womanism addresses intersectionality. It merges the triple oppression of sex, race, and class; additionally, womanist attitudes flourish from a "holistic consciousness" rather than a separatist tendency. (26)

Womanism may seem in a way similar to black feminism in the sense that both theories based upon cultural heritage, which rejects submissiveness, which provides a platform for black women to express their resistance towards oppression. Furthermore, both theories motivate to love and value their "self", affirm their humanity, and disregard outsider perception. Lastly, both theories acknowledge women's commitment to establishing a dominance-free community void of separatism. However, as similar as both theories seem, womanists still hold their theory as having greater scope; they continue to discredit black feminism despite the efforts of scholars to detach it from its pre-conceived white middle-class image. (Taylor 26)

6. Film theory and Feminism

Film theory is related to literary theory and semiotics. It is developed to describe the core of motion pictures. Also, it reflects the society from which a film is produced. The theory is a branch of film studies. Its purpose is to recognize the emotional and mental effect a film has on an individual viewer or an audience. Film theory appeared as an attempt by filmmakers to comprehend their means of communication. Thus, they studied what renders the film a distinct and unique form of art. In the 1920s, film theorists concentrated on camera placement and editing as the main elements that distinguish the film from other art forms such as theatre. Camera position adds a new dramatic effect that is impossible to

achieve in other arts. While editing puts forward new meaning by colligating images, which influences the audience's comprehension of the setting.

After the Second World War, the theory shifted towards the ability of film to portray reality. Furthermore, in the 1960s, film theory was heavily influenced by the dominant theories of the era, including semiotics, psychoanalysis, gender studies and Marxism. Therefore, film theory witnessed the solidity of new subsidiary branches such as Feminist Film Theory and Queer Film Theory. In the 1990s, film theorists explored digital technologies and their incorporation in films. Currently, with the various advancements of the motion picture, contemporary theorists explore the collective versus the individual experience in cinema. (Fritts)

6.1.Feminist Film Theory

It is a film criticism that stems from feminist politics and theory; it emerged in the 1960s and 70s. It analyzes the representation of women in cinema and how it reflects the real world. Feminist film theory studies the relationship between women and film and chastises the male gaze, which influences the depiction of women in the industry. According to feminist film theorists, movies are often created from a male perspective. Thus, it misrepresents women through the implementation of stereotypes and degrades their social standing. The feminist film theory is still thriving and growing to include popular culture through the Bechdel test. This test asks the question of whether a film displays two women speaking to each other about any topic that is not a man. It was created by American cartoonist Alison Bechdel who credited her friend Liz Wallace for the original idea. (Hellerman)

7. Conclusion

Women have been perceived as inferior to men; therefore, they were given no control over their own lives. Eventually, women desired change and demanded equal rights. The feminist movement and theory represent a pedestal, upon which women are enabled to be opinionated, to reject patriarchal oppression, and to voice out their concerns regarding the course of their lives and the worth of their bodies. However, women had to undergo a gradual process constituted of several stages in order for them to receive their full rights as human beings.

The African American experience with women's emancipation is considerably unique, in the sense that they belong to two minority groups, people of color and women. Significantly, black women were excluded from the central feminist movements; consequently, they developed their own empowering movements. First they initiated black feminism and eventually its flaws bred womanism. Still, women of color were faced with more obstacles during their fight against intersectional oppression.

Finally, the public consumption of films requires the establishment of adequate theories that dissect the productions and provide a better understanding for the audience. Accordingly, film theory and criticism was gradually developed and it plays a significant role in manipulating the viewer's comprehension and emotions. Since films often mirror real life experiences, the degradation of women is expectedly present in them. Therefore, Feminist Film Theory was developed to keep these films under check, as well as investigate and criticize the female representation in film.

Glossary of Concepts

Black Feminism: A power-shifting relationship and critical social theory that Black women self-define and design to oppose a system of racial, gendered, sexual, and class oppression and to resist the negative images of Black womanhood existing in patriarchy and discriminatory social practices.

Misogyny: It is an extreme form of sexism that is defined as an intense hatred for women. This attitude can be conscious or unconscious. It contributes to violence against women.

Oppression: Any unjust situation where, systematically, and over a long period of time where one group denies another group access to the resources of society

Patriarchy: A form of social stratification and power-relationships in society that favors men, mainly White men, and grants them more rights and privileges over women and oppresses women's social, political, financial, sexual and human rights

Stereotype: A method of understanding used by our minds to categorize people into specific group categories. Introduced to social sciences in 1922, the term stereotype is coined by Walter Lippmann, who describes it as a “typical picture” that comes to mind when thinking about a particular group of people. However, Pilcher et al. argue that this typical image can be positive or negative, accurate or inaccurate, justified, or unjustified. These stereotypes can exist in the individual mind or the collective level.

Chapter Two: Historical Framework: Blacks from Slavery to Black Power

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1. Introduction

This chapter's main aim is to highlight the position of African Americans in society in the early and mid twentieth century. It emphasizes the position of black people in the American society after they achieved emancipation. Additionally, it underlines stereotypes that stigmatized African American women in both society and early motion picture productions. The chapter hence provides an overall image of the African American representation in film, specifically that of women, preceding the civil rights movement era.

Another objective of this chapter is to explore the civil rights movement and the Black Power movement. It aims to pave the way for the next chapter to tackle the influence of such movements on the emergence of African American oriented film. Subsequently, this chapter underlines the involvement of black women activists in the said movements and focuses on their struggle within the black community.

2. African Americans in Society

Black people have a long history in America. Africans were brought to the British colonized Virginia in 1619, marking the emergence of slavery. Simultaneously, it represents the beginning of black Americans' struggle to freedom which would last till the second half of the twentieth century. Although African Americans achieved emancipation through the civil war and the thirteenth amendment, the American white supremacist society was not ready to integrate the newly freed group as equal citizens of the American community. Throughout that period, a milestone of landmark events identifies the core of African American history. (History.com)

2.1. African Americans during slave-cultured America

The United States of America prides itself in the civil rights upon which its declaration of independence and constitution are built. However, Africans were excluded from obtaining these rights unlike any American. They were forcefully kidnapped and sold to serve in the southern plantations as a cheaper alternative work force replacing the indentured servants, who constituted the poorer Europeans. The first roots of slavery in the New World trace back to twelve years after the foundation of Jamestown, the first British settlement in Virginia. A Dutch ship brought to the shores of Virginia a total of twenty “Negros”, who represented the first original slaves in America. Eventually, slavery gradually grew to become the backbone of the southern agricultural business. (Friedman 3, 4)

By 1770, fearing rebellion from the large slave minority, white masters strengthened their control over their property by toughening the attitudes towards the slaves through various measures. White southern elites encouraged anti-black racism to devalue Africans in comparison to the poor European workers. Furthermore, they considered black children slaves from birth, and allowed the murder of slaves as part of their punishments. Slaves were compelled to obey their white masters; they were harshly overworked and the slave codes laws permitted the brutal punishment of slaves who do not abide by their masters’ demands. They were not allowed to learn reading or writing; also they were denied their basic human rights. (4, 5)

2.2. The Emergence of the Civil War and its Aftermath

The nineteenth century America witnessed a major growth of abolitionist movements; mainly orchestrated by the white liberal north with support of southern slaves. The northern

radical abolitionists protested against the tight slave codes applied in the south. Subsequently, the liberal north opted for the pressure of their southern counterparts to drive them towards abolition. (History.com)

America's newly established political system failed to provide for black people the same rights as the white Americans. Hence, opponents of slavery set to end the practice of slavery in the southern states. They demanded the abolition of slavery nationwide and the prevention of the act from expanding westward towards the newly explored west lands. However, the peaceful negotiation approach with the south proved to be a failure; therefore, more aggressive activities such as the assistance of slaves to escape to the north had to occur in order to achieve freedom for African Americans. As a consequence, black codes in the south were tightened, and new laws were passed to punish runaway slaves. (Friedman 9-12)

The unchanged status of African Americans in the south intensified their conflicts with the north further. In 1860, following the election of Abraham Lincoln for presidency, he declared his rejection of the "monstrous Injustice", that is slavery. (14) However, as an attempt to prevent the disbandment of the union, Lincoln obliged to maintain the practice in the states where it already existed, while banning its extension to the west. Lincoln's venture to maintain the union was met by the secession of eleven southern states in December of 1860; these states created the Confederate States of America. (15)

Northerners viewed the Union as a tight bond relating all Americans rather than a mere temporary alliance that can be discarded by any side at any time. Thus, Lincoln had to solve the issue of the south regardless of the outcome. He declared that the rescue of the union is the utmost priority, whether it required the partial or full abolition of slavery or even its remainder. However, slavery represented a major cause of the hostility between the south

and the north. Hence, more northerners displayed an absolute rejection towards slavery and preferred the full abolition of the practice. (15)

The southern states, unlike the modernized north, based its economy solely on the production of crops. Accordingly, southerners were in no way ready to release the immense free labor force in which they invested their money and on whom they relied for tending their plantations. In 1861, a four year war known as the American Civil War erupted between the north and the eleven states that withdrew from the union. President Lincoln called for raising temporary militia troops; additionally, he ordered a “Naval Blockade” on the southern rebellious states. (Weber & Hassler)

The union and the confederate did not expect the war to continue for the period it did, which is why Lincoln prevented his commanders from emancipating slaves in the areas to which they were assigned. The president’s decision was a strategy to avoid the withdrawal of the remaining slave-holding states from the union. However, as war stretched longer, Lincoln believed that freeing the slaves will serve the benefit of the union and be a finishing blow to the confederate as the freed slaves would join the union militiamen. Subsequently, he issued his celebrated Emancipation Proclamation in which he granted freedom for every slave in the southern states. (Weber & Hassler)

The north left the war with a sweeping victory. Although the civil war is the deadliest war in the history of the United States, it was crucial in deciding the nature of the American nation in the future. To restore their representation in the congress, the seceding southern states were forced to approve the “Reconstruction Amendments” consisting of the thirteenth, the fourteenth and the fifteenth amendments which officially banned the practice of slavery. Hence, the war resolved two main issues once and for all; first, it restored the

union and secured the unity of the United States. Last, it completely abolished the institution of slavery and granted total freedom for African Americans. (McPherson)

2.3.African Americans' Status during the Reconstruction Era

Lincoln's emancipation proclamation freed the slaves in the southern states during the civil war; afterwards, the thirteenth amendment freed all American slaves. Nevertheless, the period after the civil war, known as reconstruction era, did not present much of a good freedom experience for the newly emancipated blacks. African Americans were not accustomed to freedom, especially while living among hostile whites. On that matter, Houston Hartsfield Holloway, a freedman, declared that during the time neither people of color knew how to practice freedom, nor did white people know how to live with free slaves. (Thomas, et al)

The victorious north attempted to reconstruct the south by assimilating free labor principles, which calls for the provision of civil rights for Africans Americans. Temporarily, with the help of the northern military, the emancipated slaves enjoyed a period of active participation in the political process, suffrage, education, employment and land ownership. In brief, they were granted the same "constitutional privileges" as white Americans. However, southerners viewed reconstruction as a method for the north to humiliate them; hence, it was not much welcomed by the southern whites. Eventually, starting from Lincoln's assassination, the north's desire for reconciliation with the south pushed aside the protection of African Americans' civil rights. Gradually, racist southern aristocrats were able to reverse the freedom of blacks through the implementation of segregation state laws. (Friedman 19)

2.4.African Americans and Segregation

The ghost of white supremacy gradually expanded and seized control over the United States. The freedom of African Americans was eventually overpowered by the black codes that the hostile southern states adopted to restrain Blacks. Reconstruction crumbled into failure as legislatures rapidly ratified segregation laws which managed black people's lives. The "Jim Crow" laws were the first black codes to be enacted in a number of white supremacist southern states, named after a character performed by a blackface actor, the name Jim Crow was used to diminish the value of African Americans much like the laws named after it. (History.com)

By the end of the nineteenth century, southern state legislatures adopted laws that require total separation of blacks and whites. Colored people were to have their own establishments separate from those of white people; starting from schools, railroad cars and shops to restaurants, hotels, public libraries and even water fountains. Courts established the "separate but equal" dogma and used it as a "loophole" to assert the constitutionality of the segregation laws. The concept was first used in the landmark case of Plessy v. Ferguson¹ where the Supreme Court ruled segregation non-discriminatory. (Friedman 21)

3. The Status of African Americans in the early 20th century

The post reconstruction segregation laws remained even into the twentieth century. African Americans were obliged to adopt a stance to change the harsh reality of violence they experienced. In the southern states, some people of color assumed that asserting their civil rights would be fruitless. Henceforth, they argued that black people need self

¹ A landmark decision of the U. S supreme court where racial segregation in public facilities was constitutionalized as long as these facilities were equal in quality.

improvement; specifically, education and economic development. Led by Booker T. Washington², this group of Colored people focused on learning practical skills and achieving economic independence. Washington founded the Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute³ where black men were received industrial education. (22)

Washington remained a leading personality to African Americans for years. However, his philosophy of compromise with white supremacy was eventually found to be pointless. Black people sought leadership from another black figure, W.E.B. Du Bois⁴, who adopted a rather aggressive approach. He asserted that the only way for African Americans to reach their full civil rights is by protesting. In 1905, Du Bois and a number of black intellectuals founded the “Niagara Movement” opposing accommodation to white supremacy and advocating full civil rights for black men and women which later evolved into the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). (23)

The twentieth century witnessed colored people and their white allies’ grandiose effort to overthrow the segregation laws through legal measures. The NAACP joined hands with the Harlem Renaissance intellectuals who wrote about the era’s affairs. Starting from 1913 till the 1930’s, Du Bois continued writing in advocacy of African Americans’ integration as full members of the American society. (23)

4. African American Women Stereotypes

The experience of black women was different from that of black men, considering how they belong to two historically oppressed groups, African Americans and women. As a

² An African American educator and major leader to the black community in the late 19th century.

³ Currently known as the Tuskegee University, it was founded in 1881 and served as a school that provided practical training for Black men in manual trades and agricultural skills.

⁴ An African American sociologist and prominent civil rights activist.

consequence, women were linked to devaluing sexist and racist images. These images were often misconceptions perpetuated by white supremacists. Patricia Morton, assistant professor of sociology at Wayne state university, states that stereotypical representations of African American women root back to the pre-civil war period. These stereotypes flourished around four main archetypes, the mammy, the Jezebel, the matriarch and the tragic mulatto. (Mgadmi & Mahassen 41)

The stereotypical perception of black women deemed them inferior to white women; in the sense that it allocated negative attributes to black women, unlike white women whose attributes reflected ideal womanhood. Black women were viewed as unattractive, unclean, unwomanly, lustful, seductive and physically strong. They were placed far from being feminine and respectable. Morton proposes that all stereotypes regarding black women reflected dehumanizing traits except for the mammy. (Mgadmi & Mahassen 42)

4.2. The Mammy Stereotype

The mammy was a central myth in the memoirs and diaries that emerged in the post reconstruction era. It served as an argument that debunked the critics' claims regarding the brutality of slavery; since the mammy was depicted as joyful and satisfied as a servant. However, the truth is that those women were taken involuntarily from their own children and husbands to be the caretaker of white children and families. Mammy was portrayed as a "grandmotherly type", old, soothing and comfortable. (Harris-Perry 68)

Mammies were described as physically strong and overweight, unattractive women with dark skin and thick lips. They represented the best servant, cook and housekeeper in white households. Furthermore, mammy was depicted to be stronger than black men and less feminine than white women. To white people, mammy was the perfect slave, her motherly

figure, her loyalty, obedience and her commitment were characteristics that favored her over other slaves working in the plantations. (Mgadmi & Mahassen 42)

4.1. The Jezebel Stereotype

Another myth central to the slaveholding south was the jezebel. It painted black women with an immoral and hypersexual image. It represented a sexually deviant and aggressive black woman. The jezebel stereotype was used to justify the oppression of black women by their white masters and rationalize their continuous sexual assault and exploitation. This myth caused the vulnerability of African American women to sexual assault; as well as their denial of natural human lust to revoke the stereotype. (Collins 81, 82)

The jezebel unlike the mammy was described as a sexually aggressive young or middle aged woman. The stereotype portrayed black people in general and women in specific as bestial. Moreover, it served as a disguise to the public exposure and involuntary nudity imposed on black women which contradicted the Victorian principle of prudish women. Thus, it justified white men's brutality and validated their superiority. (Harris-Perry, 55)

4.2. The Sapphire Stereotype

The Sapphire stereotype emerged in the early twentieth century; it is often interchanged with the angry black woman label. In the 1930's, *Amos 'n' Andy*⁵ radio show popularized the representation of African American women as hostile, aggressive, over-confident and devoid of empathy. The sapphire is an assertive, unpleasant and unreasonably angry black woman. Although the sapphire is the label used to represent the stereotype, the angry black woman encapsulates various images; such as "the bad black woman", "the black Bitch",

⁵ An American radio and television comedic sitcom that aired from 1928 to 1960 set in Harlem, the center of African American culture in New York.

and “the emasculating matriarch”. However, being in one way nameless, the sapphire stereotype is deemed by black feminists as a stereotype that mirrors reality. (81)

4.3.Black Matriarchy

The matriarch trope represents the independent black woman who leads her own household .She is the chief decision maker and bread winner in her family. Unlike the mammy, the matriarch represents the “bad” black mother in black households. (Collins 75) According to Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s report in 1965 titled “The Negro Family: The Case for National Action”, black matriarchy is the prime obstacle that prevented African Americans from achieving equal rights. Moynihan argued that black women controlling black families and their unwomanly persistence for dominance enfeebled their male partners and damaged their children’s opportunities. (Harris-Perry 84)

In his report, Moynihan urged the authorities to terminate the provision of assistance to single poor black women; as these women were fully responsible for their condition and assisting them would be unfair. The report displayed a solid evidence for the danger of the angry black woman stereotype which it renamed as black matriarchy. This myth forces black women to stand accountable for a power they do not hold, while that power is used by white men and even black men to oppress black women. (84-85)

5. Blacks in Films Prior to The 1970s

The film industry’s development brought a lengthy history of African American devaluation, through constant perpetuation of misconceptions and stereotypes that scarred the black image. Much like in the American society, the motion picture industry was dominated by whites, while blacks were in most cases not even granted roles. African

American characters were portrayed by white actors in blackface, who delivered a series of insulting and degrading caricatures stemming from the various prevailing stereotypes surrounding black people. Even when black entertainers are given roles in these white dominated works, they were restricted by stereotypes. (Bogle and Singleton 29-30)

The silent film era was a goldmine of widespread racist tropes regarding African Americans. Films such as *Pickaninnies Doing a Dance* (1894)⁶ and *The Wooing and the Wedding of a Coon* (1905)⁷ portrayed blacks as comic, clownish and objects of mockery. However, those early films fail to even hold a candle to the critically acclaimed, greatest film ever made *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). Directed by D. W. Griffith⁸, the film was adapted from Thomas Dixon's novel *The Clansman* which delivered Dixon's view of the reconstruction era and its negative effect on the south. (Lawrence 1)

The Birth of a Nation was a landmark of what Ed Guerrero referred to as Hollywood's "plantation genre" which popularized the misrepresentation of slavery and its stereotypes. Griffith's film is considered extremely controversial due to its utmost racist depictions of African Americans and its exaggerated glorification of the Ku Klux Klan. Furthermore, the events of the film were built upon the racist historical interpretation of white southern men, who viewed the emancipated black slaves as useless, dangerous savages. Additionally, it illustrated Reconstruction as a method to humiliate and disfranchise the white south and empower the blacks. (Guerrero 10-11)

Griffith's unreasonable representation of black people incited harsh disapproval from African Americans and Liberal whites. Intellectuals wrote against the production deeming it

⁶ Also known as *The Pickaninny Dance from the 'passing show'*, it is an American minstrel act played by white actors in blackface.

⁷ An early American produced silent film with a one minute run time.

⁸ An American film director, he is a pioneer of financing feature-length movie.

an unjust, false and racist representation. Black activist organizations such as NAACP protested and called for censorship. Additionally, Emmet J. Scott, former secretary of Booker T. Washington, attempted to make an all black film as a response to *The Birth of a Nation*. The film was to be titled *The Birth of a Race*; however, the movie faced various obstacles and although it premiered in a fancy theatre, it failed miserably. (Lawrence 4)

Hollywood's continuous racist representation of black people prompted African Americans to establish their own cinematic movement and genre. Filled with diversity, the "race films" employed black entertainers and staff who presented the true identity of the black community from 1915 to 1950. Black filmmakers established their own production companies separate from Hollywood. Names such as Noble Johnson and Oscar Micheaux strived to provide a space for African Americans to enjoy leading roles rather than being casted as servants or minor stereotyped characters. (Bogle and Singleton 33,37) Nevertheless, these early independent filmmakers struggled financially; moreover, independently produced films were blocked by Hollywood's booking system from reaching theatres. (Diawara 4)

5.1.Hattie McDaniel, Hollywood's Most Popular Mammy

Black women were no exception from Hollywood's stereotypical representation of African Americans. Black women played roles of mammy figures that provided comfort and advice for their white masters. Hattie McDaniel was the most popular actress to play a mammy in black Hollywood; born in a family of performers, McDaniel climbed her way in the film industry with the help of her brother. She starred alongside the industry's biggest names during the 1930s. Although all the roles she had occupied were the stereotypical mammy figure, McDaniel's attitude, confidence and assertiveness made her performance

stand out and built her reputation which earned her the famous mammy role in David O. Selznick's *Gone with the Wind*. McDaniel's performance in Selznick's film earned her the coveted Academy Award for best supporting actress in 1939, making her the first person of color to receive the prestigious award. However, it also earned her criticism from her community, specifically from the NAACP. (Bogle and Singleton 125-133)

6. The Civil Rights movement

In the early 1950s, the living standards for American families improved as more families became financially stable. However, that was not the case for African Americans; for the American society's racist attitude towards black people deprived many black individuals from job opportunities or equal wages. Furthermore, segregation laws were the norm under the "separate but equal" doctrine which camouflaged the actual injustice, racism and cruelty that tolled African Americans. Colored people had to go to separate schools from whites, separate restaurants; they had to ride buses in the colored designated area; they even had separate water fountains. However, this separation was far from being equal as it emphasized white superiority and treated people of color as second-grade citizens. (McNeese 48, 49)

The landmark *Brown vs. Board of Education*⁹ case in 1954 represented the first step towards desegregation. The lawsuit aimed to integrate black children in white schools, considering how segregated black schools were not as well equipped and financed as their white counterparts. Although the Supreme Court ruled in favor of the black community, the racist southern states did not fathom the thought of black children in the same classrooms as

⁹ A landmark decision of the U.S supreme court that ruled racial segregation in public schools to be unconstitutional regardless of their equal quality

white children. Hence, the states rejected the desegregation of schools instead of complying with the Court's decision. Moreover, the American government refrained from taking federal action to enforce the integration that only encouraged the southern stubbornness further. (Morris 26-29)

By the mid 1950s the south was not just overly racist, but also extremely dangerous for people of color. White southerners bullied, maimed and murdered black people who sought to be integrated or defied the proclaimed white supremacy. The practice of lynching¹⁰ was still prevalent despite its unlawfulness; one major case was the castration, murder and mutilation of fourteen year old Emmett Till in 1955 after he was accused of whistling at a white woman. Several other attacks targeted people who were affiliated with the NAACP; thus, many black people were fired from their jobs, assaulted, shot and even bombed. (29-30)

African Americans suffered major devaluation on public transport as well, despite the fact that their fares constituted a large portion of the city buses income. Subsequently, this unfair treatment triggered the will for change within the black community and a chain of events led to the landmark Montgomery Bus Boycott. In 1955, Rosa Park was arrested for refusing to give up her seat to a white man; her case became the steppingstone for the civil rights movement. The arrest of Rosa Park united Blacks and encouraged them to boycott the city buses of Montgomery, Alabama. The Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) was formed under the leadership of Martin Luther King Jr, one of the influential figures in black history, to organize the boycott. (Friedman 35-36)

The boycott's success in desegregating public transport in Montgomery motivated King and other seniors of MIA to engage in further civil rights battles. However, the black

¹⁰ The informal and illegal public execution of alleged criminals by a mob

youth was growing impatient with the slow organization of the adults; therefore, they decided to start moving. In 1960, four black college students organized a “sit-in” in Greensboro, South Carolina. (Friedman) They went into a department store and sat on their lunch counter which provided a whites only service. Eventually, many other African American and few white students were inspired and joined the “sit-in” protests across 60 southern cities. A prominent leader of the movement was Diane Nash who served alongside many other Black students in the nonviolent resistance of the civil rights movement. (36-37)

After the success of the sit-in protests in desegregating certain services in several states, various other movements were organized which garnered mass support from the black community and resulted in crucial achievements. Landmark events include, the freedom rides¹¹ in 1961, the Birmingham protests¹² in April 1963, Martin Luther King’s legendary speech “I Have a Dream” during the Washington march in August 1963, the voting rights march¹³ from Selma to Montgomery in 1965 and the Chicago movement¹⁴ in 1966. These effortful events proved fruitful in the sense that it contributed to several laws being signed by the government, including the civil rights act of 1964 which outlawed any form of discrimination based on race, color, religion and sex, and the voting rights acts of 1965 which prohibited racial discrimination in suffrage. However, these achievements also accumulated tragedies, as many civil rights figures and activists were assassinated, among which was King in 1968. (McNeese 92-143)

¹¹ A civil rights operation where activists boarded interstate buses to the segregated southern states to challenge their rejection of abolishing segregation laws

¹² A series of protests organized in Birmingham, Alabama calling for the desegregation of public facilities

¹³ Three protest marches held in 1965 in the state of Alabama to demand voting rights for black people

¹⁴ A series of rallies and marches that demanded a variety of rights

7. The Black Power Movement

In 1965, the civil rights movement managed to secure some rights for African Americans. However, equality was still too far to reach and racist practices continued. Thus, African Americans demanded an approach different from King's nonviolent resistance which marked the birth of the "Black Power" movement. The movement used strong harsh language in its speeches. It advocated for the use of force to make the American society accept equality, an attitude which King strongly opposed. On the other hand, prominent civil rights activists, Malcolm X¹⁵ and Stokely Carmichael¹⁶, showed massive support for the new movement. Malcolm X believed that black people should achieve equality by any means including violence. His assassination in 1965 helped strengthening the movement and made it grow. (Rissman 7-10)

Carmichael used the slogan "Black Power" as an encouragement for black people to join forces and cooperate to improve and seize control over the economy, politics and culture of the black community. Moreover, black power urged the celebration of African American culture; it called for the black heritage pride and encouraged the African American natural look rather than imitating white people. Several organizations emerged under the black power movement such as the Black Panther Party for Self Defense¹⁷ whose members decided to use weapons to protect African Americans from any attacks, specifically from the police. However, these organizations clashed when it came to ideologies and principles bringing the movement to an end. (12-33)

¹⁵ An African American Muslim minister and human rights activist, he was a major figure in the civil rights movement

¹⁶ An African American political activist and prominent organizer in the civil rights movement

¹⁷ A revolutionary political organization founded to combat police brutality

8. The Role of Black Women in The Civil Rights and Black Power Movements

Black women contributed immensely to the African American battle for civil rights. From Rosa Parks whose refusal to give up her seat in the bus sparked the emergence of the civil rights movement, to Diane Nash who led the Nashville sit-in protests and participated in the freedom rides; black women provided a valuable asset to the civil rights movement. However, since the movement was heavily male dominated, women figures were overshadowed by men; with some not being credited for their participation. Prominent female leaders and strategists including Ella Baker¹⁸, Fannie Lou Hamer¹⁹ and Gwendolyn Zoharah Simmons²⁰, headed organizations and projects. Nevertheless, they often worked behind the scenes and were not provided any chances to deliver speeches at the marches. Simmons recalls the difficulties as a woman activist in the movement stating how men received priority over resources and how women were never taken seriously by neither the leadership nor the male colleagues. Additionally, Simmons discusses the acts of sexual advances that occurred towards women which urged black women to join the feminist movement. (*Women*)

During the Black Power Movement, the situation of women was not much different. Although women held leadership positions in various Black Nationalist organizations, including the Black Panthers, in which Elaine Brown was appointed as a leader in 1974, they struggled against the sexist attitudes of the male led community. Black women's contribution was marginalized by the male activists who viewed them as mere assistants and not as equal fighters in the movement. Black women participated in the fight against racism while struggling against the prevalent sexism within their community. Hence,

¹⁸ A black American civil rights and human rights activist based in New York

¹⁹ A black American voting and women's rights activist, she was a major leader in the civil rights movement

²⁰ A black American activist and professor specialized in Islamic feminism

African American women continued their battle within black feminism in the 1970s and 1980s. (Davis)

9. Conclusion

African American history constitutes black people's long and harsh journey towards the complete freedom that whites have always enjoyed. Throughout their struggle for equality and civil rights, black people's ideals and principles evolved. Specifically, African Americans shaped their identity as a community through the accumulated experience they got from all the events they went through. Furthermore, the American society's treatment of African Americans gradually changed. Although racist attitudes continued ever since the abolition of slavery throughout the Jim Crow era of segregation, the efforts of the black community helped change their situation. Meanwhile, black women struggled within the community against the sexist attitudes of their male counterparts.

The American society's perception of black people influenced their representation in Hollywood cinema; thus, their participation was restricted to stereotypical roles. Despite efforts of independent black production companies to clear their image, the segregation laws and racist mentality of America prevented the works from succeeding. Nevertheless, the 1970s witnessed the rise of new film genre more historically significant for African Americans, known as Blaxploitation.

**Chapter Three: Black Women and Blaxploitation: analysis of “*Coffy*” (1973) and
“*Foxy Brown*” (1974)**

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1. Introduction

This final chapter of the research offers a general overview about Blaxploitation. It includes a brief account of the landmark works of the genre, relevant pioneering figures, along with the main features that set the cinematic era apart from its predecessors. Since Blaxploitation emerged in a time of political change for black people, the chapter relates the rise of Blaxploitation to the movements prevailing during that period. It also discusses the fall of the genre and the reasons behind it.

The chapter scrutinizes the representation of black women within Blaxploitation films; specifically, the portrayal of black femininity and the perpetuation of stereotypes related to black women. Therefore, it provides a general definition of black femininity and gives an idea of the black woman image in Hollywood. The films chosen for the case study offer a perfect example of the Blaxploitation female lead and the ghetto image of the black community popular within the genre. The analysis of *Coffy* (1973) and *Foxy Brown* (1974) relies on knowledge from the first chapter for discussion and relates it to events based upon the second chapter of the research.

2. The Rise of 1970's Blaxploitation Cinema

Prior to the 1970s, American films employed degrading images of blacks in form of stereotypes and misconceptions. Despite the continuous efforts of independent black filmmakers to provide a more accurate representation for their community, their works lacked the Hollywood glamour and were blocked from reaching a larger audience. However, the emergence of social justice movements such as the civil rights and black power movements influenced Hollywood to change its attitudes towards African American

representation. Subsequently, the industry started to present images of black people outside the common stereotypical ones. Moreover, cultural evolution within the black community resulting from the black power movement's emphasis on Black Nationalism led to a mass celebration of African American beauty. As a result, cinema adopted the elements of black beauty into productions starting from the late 1960s. (Sims 18-19)

2.1. Definition of Blaxploitation

Blaxploitation cinema refers to Hollywood films produced in the period between 1970 and 1974 by black and white filmmakers and geared towards a black audience. The films depict black stories played by black casts often going through adventures in the ghetto. According to Lawrence, the era started with the release of *Cotton Comes to Harlem* (1970); however, generally, film historians cite *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss song* (1970) as the precursor of Blaxploitation movies. The aforementioned films along with *Shaft* (1971), and *Super Fly* (1972) fortified the main features that later defined the Blaxploitation Genre. (Lawrence 18)

Guerrero argues that the emergence of Blaxploitation films was a result to the growth of political and social awareness within the African American community. The significant rise of Black Nationalist attitudes evoked black people's desire to see a fully humanized African American representation on the big screen of Hollywood. Subsequently, the motion picture industry began making black-oriented films exploiting the African American expectations for financial gain which led to the naming of the genre as Blaxploitation. (69-70)

The first signs of the rise of Blaxploitation resulted after phases of development that roughly began in 1967, during that period Sidney Poitier, an African American Hollywood star, has garnered negative attention from the black community for his strictly servitude

roles, while simultaneously receiving praise from the white dominated film industry whom awarded him an Oscar. The black community felt the need to have manly, confident and bold black protagonists. Therefore, macho athlete-gone actors Jim Brown and Fred Williamson's popularity skyrocketed in the late 1960's; additionally, black-centered plots like *Cotton Comes to Harlem* and *Watermelon Man* paved the way for the Blaxploitation wave. (70-71)

In 1971, African American filmmaker and actor Melvin Van Peebles created *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*, where he served as director, producer, editor, composer and protagonist. Van Peebles advertised the film through black press and radio; hence, it reached black youth and was eventually was celebrated as a film with a different experience and perspective. Van Peebles was praised as hero by the new generation of African Americans, and his film was labeled as "the first truly revolutionary black film" by Huey P. Newton, the Leader of the black panthers. *Sweetback* represents the stepping stone for the rise of Blaxploitation and the blueprint for the most popular Blaxploitation works. (Bogle 272)

2.2. Blaxploitation film features

Blaxploitation films often revolve around an African American protagonist who displays social and political consciousness. Additionally, Blaxploitation films reject the rigid, roles often given to blacks in mainstream cinema, mainly servants. Therefore, they portray the protagonists as detectives, police officers, gangsters and pimps, as opposed to the traditional servitude roles. The strength of the characters stems from their ability to pull through and maneuver "The Man" which is a slang that represents the government, all while maintaining their identity. Therefore, characters might be involved in the establishment; however they do so under their own terms and for the benefit of the blacks. (Lawrence 18-19)

Additionally, Blaxploitation films include a myriad of supporting characters whose roles are crucial for the narrative and for the emergence of the black hero or heroine. To clarify, the films' protagonists' journey intertwines with the supporting characters whether in support or opposition in a way that highlights the protagonist's non stereotypical role. Moreover, Blaxploitation cinema replaces the traditional Hollywood southern setting with local urban areas or "ghettos" where a range of black characters thrive. The setting provides a more realistic image of the pauperized community and displays its conditions to the public. (19)

Generally, Blaxploitation portrays white characters as villains whom the black protagonists struggle to overthrow by any means possible. Therefore, the depiction of violence and aggressive behavior is important for the plot regardless of the hero or heroine's motive to use it since it is necessary for them in order to defy the oppressive system. Moreover, Blaxploitation films displays overt black sexuality images in order to defy the stereotypical images constantly offered in Hollywood. Black performers such as Richard Roundtree and Pam Grier are attractive of both blacks and whites, while maintaining full control of their sexuality and erotic encounters. (19-20)

Blaxploitation films also employ themes that revolve around the African American experience. The genre addresses various issues like oppression, police brutality, racial profiling, racism, drug use and prostitution directly or indirectly. Significantly, actress Pam Grier battles drug dealers in *Coffy* (1973), and enters a prostitution ring in *Foxy Brown* (1974). Additionally, the genre often contains soundtracks performed by black artists within the rhythm and blues genre to compliment its themes and the cinematic images. The previously mentioned features were universalized in *Cotton Comes to Harlem* and became the basic elements of a Blaxploitation film. (20)

2.3. Blaxploitation Landmark Films

The emergence of Melvin Van Peebles' *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss* (1971) *Song* is the introduction of Blaxploitation cinema. Van Peebles expanded the elements that were first introduced in Ossie Davis's *Cotton Comes to Harlem* (1970) and presented direct images of Black sexuality and violence. Van Peebles projects Black Nationalism by portraying the black ghetto as an internal society, in which the protagonist Sweetback struggles against the white authority referred to as The Man, and receives help from his fellow African American citizens. *Sweetback's* screening involved hesitation and doubt regarding the audience reaction; however, the film grossed 10 million dollars nationwide. (Guerrero 86)

After few months from the sweeping success of Van Peebles' *Sweetback*, Gordon Parks released another iconic Blaxploitation production *Shaft*. Owing to *Sweetback's* magnitude, Hollywood seized the opportunity to make profit by creating similar films, among which is *shaft*. The first script of *Shaft* was altered to cater to a black audience, to which Van Peebles states, ***“Originally, the script of Shaft was written for a white actor, but they changed to a black. They threw in a couple 'motherfuckers' and that became a black film.”*** (qtd. in Guerrero 91)

Shaft starred Richard Roundtree as a black detective in New York, who accepts to find and rescue a black mobster's kidnapped daughter, while struggling to eradicate the white mobsters who are chasing him. The film earned over 10.8 million dollars in the first year; moreover, Isaac Hayes's soundtrack complimented the theme of the film and earned him an Oscar for Best Original Song of 1972. *Sweetback* and *Shaft's* Box-office success displayed the Black audience's interest in films that tackle the prevalent political and social issues during that time. (Bogle 272-273)

Although the early Blaxploitation era emphasized the strong masculine black hero, black women had their fair share of strong and tough leading roles. Among the first female lead Blaxploitation films was *Coffy* (1973), which was released after the success of *Cleopatra Jones* (1973). The film was directed by Jack Hill and starred Pam Grier as the title character, a nurse who seeks revenge upon the drug dealers who turned her little sister into a heroin addict. (Lawrence 81-82)

While *Cleopatra Jones*'s star Tamara Dobson initiated the Blaxploitation heroine trend, Pam Grier remains the most influential female star. After her success in *Coffy*, Grier starred in *Foxy Brown* (1974) which had a similar theme to the former film; however, it ended up becoming Grier's definitive role. *Foxy Brown* revolves around a black woman who seeks revenge against her undercover agent lover's white murderers, Katherine and Steve, who lead a drug and prostitution ring. (Dunn 108)

3. The Fall of Blaxploitation

The success of *Shaft* led to a trail of similar productions in the period extending from 1971 to 1974. In their attempt to mirror the success of their predecessors *Shaft* and *Sweetback*, these productions continuously repeated and exaggerated the Blaxploitation features. Consequently, the strong surge of the Blaxploitation genre bred uneasiness among black activists and leaders, film critics and intellectuals who viewed that these cheap Hollywood-produced black films do more harm than good to the black community. Significantly, they contributed to a major cultural shift among the inner-city black youth, from political awareness and social improvement to glorification of drug dealing and gangster mentality. (Guerrero 94-97)

The uneasiness surrounding Blaxploitation emerged ever since the beginning of the era; however, the concentrated attack that led to the demise of the genre grew during the marketing for the release of *Superfly* (1972). Rapidly, the disapproval of Blaxploitation grew fervent among the black civic organizations among which was the NAACP that led the formation of the Los Angeles Coalition against Blaxploitation (CAB). Furthermore, several black film artists voiced their dissatisfaction with the genre; Bea Richards referred to it as a “skin game”, while Cicely Tyson expressed her worry on the effects of the presented vile images on black youth. Moreover, actor Moses Gunn who participated in *Shaft* stated that if Blaxploitation films were the depiction of black society then they are nothing but “euphemistic racism”. (100-101)

Black leaders such as Reverend Jesse Jackson, Junius Griffin and Marion Barry campaigned for a boycott of the then upcoming film *Superfly* and any similar future films, which they considered as vulgar, violent and futile. Not to mention, *Superfly* contributed to the glorification of Dope-pushing and further normalized the stereotype of black men thriving as gangsters, pimps and drug dealers. Additionally, Hollywood milked the Blaxploitation genre through the overproduction of low-budget films with a repetitive formula which filled up the theatre booking time. Thus, the genre assisted the industry to suppress efforts of independent black filmmakers to portray the genuine cultural, political and social images of the black community. (100-104)

The major blow that tolled Blaxploitation and contributed directly to its collapse was Hollywood’s realization that black audiences grew indifferent to the genre’s blueprint of crime and ghetto action narratives, as well as the black versus white social struggle. Therefore, the industry’s pursuit for the exclusive satisfaction of black audiences through predominantly black productions to generate profits was no longer necessary. Instead, it

could create films marketed to black and white audiences alike which would double the earnings. Consequently, Hollywood abandoned Blaxploitation and its stars and replaced it with crossover films which employed a limited amount of well known black stars in their production; furthermore, they discarded the Blaxploitation feature for the purpose of attracting more white audience. (105, 110)

4. Black Femininity and Blaxploitation

Generally, femininity is a social construct that has been shaped throughout history from a Eurocentric lens; however, the traditional conception of femininity does not fully integrate African American women considering their historical experiences. Traditional femininity refers to the individual and social views regarding the particular attitudes and roles that are suitable for women under a patriarchal system. The traditional definition of femininity comprises certain conceptualized norms that determine womanhood; such as, chastity, sensitivity, caretaking, stereotypical images and roles and dependence. Nevertheless, since femininity is strongly attached to gender roles, the traditional definition excludes black women, given that their historical experience is unique to that of white women. (Davis et al. 1-3)

4.1. Definition of Black Femininity

The term femininity is often used to refer to womanhood which can be perceived as “hegemonic femininity”. The notion of hegemonic femininity reflects the social construction of qualities that women are expected to have. Ultimately, femininity entails that women support men in society through having the standards of nurture, emotionality, care and attractiveness. However, this European perspective of womanhood that centers femininity

on thin, weak and dependent women does not necessarily apply to black women. For instance, black women do not conform to the ideal physical image of thin toned females, instead studies found that black women are less concerned about their weight and consider big women as attractive in comparison to white women. (Chaney 516)

Although a direct definition of black femininity and a list of norms that constitute it are unavailable, it can be noted that African American women fall to a certain extent to the same feminine expectations as white women; however, their perception of their femininity is by some means different due to their racial and gender encounters through history. The aftermath of slavery and segregation, along with the economic situation of African Americans and the widespread poverty in the black community led black women to occupy both feminine and masculine gender roles. During slavery, black women were forced to fulfill domestic duties such as cooking, cleaning, housekeeping and child care, as well as manual labor alongside black men in plantations. Subsequently, black women maintained both sets of gender roles even after the abolition of slavery due to the deterioration of the economic and social conditions in the black community. Therefore, certain qualities such as independence, strength and dominance are key components of black femininity alongside the traditional femininity norms. (Davis et al. 3; Chaney 517-518)

4.2. The Black Feminist Perspective of Black Femininity

In the 1970's, several scholars such as Alice Walker, Bell Hooks and Patricia Hill Collins used black feminism as a vehicle to separate black femininity from traditional white femininity. While Walker introduced the notion of "womanism" to illustrate black women's experience and perception of femininity away from the white-centered feminism, Collins claimed that the intersection of race, gender, class and sexuality is a contributing factor to

the social struggle of black women. Moreover, since African American women were excluded from the white sexist definition of femininity, black feminist scholars encouraged black women to self-define and determine their womanhood. (Collins 2; Chaney 518)

4.3.Hollywood's Representation of Black Femininity

The representation of African American women in the film industry revolved mainly around racist stereotypes of black femininity constructed by whites. Generally, black women in Hollywood productions were reduced to either asexual servants using the mammy stereotype or hypersexual animals through the jezebel stereotype. In addition, the patriarchal archetype hindered black femininity by portraying hard-working, independent and assertive black women as unfeminine bad mothers who bring failure upon their community. However, although Blaxploitation films proved to be quite progressive considering they challenged traditional depictions of black women in film by casting strong action heroines, they were criticized for often sexualizing and objectifying them. (Harris-Perry 100; Lawrence 80, 81)

5. Pam Grier "Queen of Blaxploitation"

While Tamara Dobson initiated the image of the strong action heroine in the Blaxploitation era, it was Pam Grier who truly nourished and popularized that representation. Born in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, to parents Gwendolyn Samuels and Clarence Grier Jr, Pam Grier moved to Los Angeles, California in 1967 where she worked as a switchboard operator for American International Pictures (AIP), an independent film production and distribution company. Eventually, Grier auditioned for and landed supporting roles in AIP sexploitation films such as *The Big Doll House* (1971) and *Beyond*

the Valley of the Dolls (1971). However, her leading role in Jack Hill's *The Big Bird Cage* (1972) kick-started her career and earned her the opportunity to play the title character of *Coffy* (1973). (Lawrence 82)

Between 1973 and 1975, Pam Grier rose to prominence after her success in *Coffy* (1973). She went on to star in *Foxy Brown* (1974), *Friday Foster* (1975) and *Sheba, Baby* (1975); consequently, Grier became a sex symbol and icon of Blaxploitation where she appeared as a vindictive, assertive and fearless “femme fatale” who reflected the prevailing social, cultural and political disruption in the American society. Ultimately, Grier's exceptional screen presence boosted her stardom and earned her the label “Queen of Blaxploitation”. Grier's trademark screen persona of the “bad-ass” female lead incorporated the 1970's attitudes of cultural change within the black community and the American society as a whole. (Mask 60-61; Lawrence 82)

Pam Grier's screen presence and charisma compensated for the weak storylines and the over-sexualized roles she received in the AIP films. According to famed movie director Roger Corman, the Blaxploitation audience was more responsive to Pam Grier than any other actresses at that time for she was successful at creating and empowering her characters regardless of the weak characterization and storylines she is given. However, Grier's popularity attracted recurrent contempt and harsh criticism from the groups that were rallying to overthrow Blaxploitation. These critics, mainly NAACP and other civil rights activists, believed that the roles given to Grier supported eroticism over content and in consequence, reinforced misconceptions of black women as violent and promiscuous. (Sims 59-61)

6. Pam Grier in *Coffy* (1973)

In 1973, American exploitation director Jack Hill wrote and directed his first Blaxploitation hit film *Coffy*. Additionally, the soundtracks were composed and produced by Black funk, soul and jazz composer Roy Ayers. The film starred Pam Grier as the title character whose last name is Coffin but she is referred to as Coffy. *Coffy* took 18 days to shoot with a budget of 500.000 dollars just like any other Blaxploitation film and it was considered a feminist picture in regards to the dominant and strong heroine. However, director Jack Hill denied any intentions of having incorporating black feminism into the film. (Waddell 114, 123)

The plot of the film revolves around a young imposing black woman in Los Angeles; who performs her duties as a nurse during the day, and hunts the drug pushers who transformed her eleven year old sister into a heroin addict by night. Coffy keeps her late night rampages as her own dirty secret while trying to justify her deeds to herself. However, Coffy's ex-boyfriend and childhood friend Carter Brown (William Elliott), an honest policeman, argues that the drug problem in the city is controlled by a powerful hierarchy in which even the Los Angeles police are involved. When Crater refuses to join hands with his partner in his illegal corrupted operations and threatens to expose him, he gets beaten into a coma by two masked men hired by his colleagues. Coffy then poses as a Jamaican prostitute named mystique for the renowned pimp and drug lord known as King George (Robert DoQui). Her goal is to find and destroy the drug lords of Los Angeles; however, she falls in more trouble when she discovers that her politician lover Howard Brunswick (Booker Bradshaw) is deeply involved with her enemies. (Hill)

6.1. Portrayal of Black Femininity in *Coffy*

From the opening scene, it is apparent that the prime emphasis of *Coffy* is displaying Grier's body to the audience; her femininity is her strongest weapon. The film opens with Coffy laying seductively in the backseat of a car as she lures in a drug pusher named Sugar Man. Once they arrive at the pusher's house Coffy sits there half naked as he makes advances on her. However, she manages to distract him then pulls a shotgun and blows his head in a grotesque scene. She then proceeds to point the shotgun at his distressed assistant and says "*it was easy for him because he really didn't believe it was coming, but it ain't gonna be easy for you because you better believe it's coming*", implying that a statuesque woman such as herself is not perceived as a threat by men. Hence, Grier deliberately uses the hypersexual stereotype of black femininity to her advantage in the role. (Sims 65)

Coffy continues to use her black femininity and sexuality as her main strategy to execute her vengeance in various occasions throughout the film. After her friend Carter is attacked and gravely injured, Coffy disguises herself as a Jamaican call girl named Mystique and aims to infiltrate the prostitution ring in which the drug lords responsible for Carter's attack are involved. Throughout the impostor prostitute mission, Coffy wears clothing that highlights her cleavage and form as she seduces her enemies. Eventually, she engages in sexual intercourse with King George, who then invites her to a party that his accomplices will attend. (Hill)

In the party, a significant scene takes place and it encapsulates the entire film's approach to black femininity. Fueled by jealousy over the attention that Mystique receives, her fellow prostitutes attempt to sabotage her plans by spilling drinks over her dress and ripping it to partly reveal her breast. Coffy quickly fixes herself in a bathroom, and then carefully places razorblades in her Afro-styled wig. In the next scene, a battle ensues between Coffy and the

prostitutes where almost all female characters in the movie have their breasts exposed after being slammed by Coffy; while the main rival prostitute is slashed by the razors feeding the amusement of the male observers among which is Arturo Vitroni, the sadistic leader of the drug cartel who calls Coffy a “wild animal”. Thus, proving that the film displays a clear sexualization of the female body in general and Pam Grier’s in specific. (Balmain; Dunn 112)

Significantly, the marketing for *Coffy* presented a colorful illustration of Grier’s half naked body, her breasts overflowing in a pink midriff-baring top and her lower body highlighted in tight bell-bottoms, alongside various illustrations of her in either violent or erotic poses. Additionally, the soundtracks of the film show a fetishization of black femininity and sexualization of the protagonist with many sexually explicit song titles such as “Coffy is the Color” and “Making Love”. In general, the film employs an evolved version of the Jezebel stereotype; however, instead of the hypersexual female slave, the audience is presented with the sexually liberated “hot mama” and “bad bitch”. Accordingly, the official tagline advertised for *Coffy* reads “Now meet the Godmother of them all...Coffy...and she’ll cream you!” which suits the poster’s illustrations and subsequently feeds the stereotypes. (Dunn 112)

Undeniably, *Coffy* proves to be a leap forward for black women. Regardless of the white male lens through which the film is developed and the relatively negative representation of black femininity, the film entitles a new chapter for black women in Hollywood. Pam Grier’s portrayal of Coffy is physically and emotionally courageous, she carries herself with confidence and she brought that to the screen. Therefore, Grier’s Coffy presented an original image of black women empowerment. Despite the criticism that the actress received for accepting phallic roles, she undoubtedly provided a voice, face and charm to a new type of

heroine that was eventually incorporated repeatedly in action films. Coffy was the first African American heroine to wield a shotgun with full conscience but no hesitation, and steadily hunt her enemies to avenge her little sister and childhood friend. (Sims 62-65)

7. Pam Grier in *Foxy Brown* (1974)

In 1974, Jack Hill returned with his second hit Blaxploitation film *Foxy Brown* which can be considered in a way a sequel to *Coffy* considering it starred Pam Grier as the title character. Hill collaborated again not just with Grier but also with producer Samuel Z. Arkoff who worked with him on *Coffy* (1973). The soundtracks were written, composed and produced by Willie Hutch, an African American singer and songwriter. The budget for *Foxy Brown* was much lower than *Coffy*'s 500.000 dollars. According to Hill, AIP had to raise his and Grier's salaries, which correspondingly meant providing fewer funds for the film. Additionally, the film was rushed and plenty of pressure was put upon Jack Hill to create a film that could generate the same success as *Coffy*. (Waddell 141, 149)

The plot of *Foxy Brown* is very similar to that of *Coffy*. It starts with Foxy's younger brother Link (Antonio Fargas), a drug dealer who is indebted to drug lords of Los Angeles. Link's life is on the line; unless he delivers the payment soon he will be slaughtered. However, as an alternative method to save his own life, he exposes the true identity of Foxy's boyfriend Michael Anderson, who in fact is an undercover agent named Dalton Ford that underwent a cosmetic surgery to protect his identity after his participation in a major drug raid. Dalton is then shot dead in front of Foxy who confronts her brother and extorts information from him. To avenge the death of her lover, Foxy disguises as an escort and works for Miss Katherine, a crime boss who runs a prostitution ring that caters to high court judges in exchange for legal protection. Once Foxy's identity and plans are discovered by Katherine and her lover Steve Elias, she gets confined with an order from Katherine by two of her underlings who eventually inject her with heroin and rape her. However, Foxy is soon back on her feet with a new plan to overthrow Katherine and Steve. (Waddell 141)

7.1. Portrayal of Black Femininity in *Foxy Brown*

The opening credits of *Foxy Brown* give the audience a glimpse of what they can expect from the film. Instantly, the film establishes the emphasis on Foxy's body which she exploits to achieve revenge. The opening credits show Pam Grier as Foxy in several alluring outfits among which is a two-piece lingerie set, dancing and swaying to the beat of Willie Hutch's song that describes her attractiveness to men and commends her physical appearance. Some of Hutch's Remarkable lyrics in the opening soundtrack include "Oh you got a smile that drives men wild", "Ms Foxy Brown, oh girl, you're the kind of woman a man needs around" and "Oh you're the treasure of ecstasy... Girl, take it from me, that most men have been searching for". (Willie) Hence, it reduces Foxy to her sexual energy and appeal to male fantasy. Accordingly, the camera focuses on her bouncy breasts as she dances which links her blackness to her femininity and sexuality. (Graham 62-63)

Much like in *Coffy*, Pam Grier in *Foxy Brown* takes the role of the vigilante who continues to utilize her black femininity as her major strategy to reach her target. Foxy goes on a rampage after being triggered by the death of her loved one similar to *Coffy*. When Foxy is introduced in the first scene of the film, the audience is introduced to her body before her character, as she exposes her bare breasts when changing from her night gown in preparation to go save her brother Link from his attackers. The next shot focuses on her as she tucks a pocket pistol in the side of her bra. From the beginning, the film exploits the jezebel image to nurture male fantasy and provide erotic pleasure; accordingly, the camera frequently exhibits Foxy's body for a good amount of time before panning out to display the scene. (Graham 66)

According to historian Londa Schiebinger, the male European perspective exaggerated the size of black women's breasts. She notes that breasts of women of African descent were

portrayed as oversized and saggy, and were considered to imply their promiscuity. Therefore, the frequent close-ups and side-shots of Grier's breast in *Foxy Brown* highlight their curvaceous figure and place her in contrast with her small breasted white female counterparts. Additionally, a major characteristic that the film uses to portray Foxy's black femininity is the juxtaposition of her sexuality with masculine symbols such as the pocket pistol she tucked in her bra. Hence, it establishes the image of the feminine strong black woman through "eroticizing" rather than "masculinizing" her. (Dunn 111, 113)

The relationship between Foxy and her brother Link epitomizes the feminine tough black woman which can be perceived as either negative or positive. In the first scene of the film, the audience sees a terrified Link calling Foxy from a payphone in the dead of the night begging her to come save him. When Foxy arrives she runs his attackers over by her car, she then fetches her brother and allows him to stay over at her house. Foxy appears to be very controlling of her brother; the moment she shouts at him to reveal the identity of his attackers and the reason behind their feud, he instantly releases information. Later when Link informs Miss Katherine with Dalton's, Foxy's boyfriend, whereabouts and leads to his murder, Foxy confronts him and threatens to kill him if he does not give her information about the culprits. After a short aggressive conversation filled with threats, Link tells Foxy about Katherine and she leaves while he sits on the floor with his ear injured. Link is then left with his girlfriend who asks "who does she think she is?" and Link replies "That's my sister baby, and she's a whole lotta woman". (Hill)

Foxy's relationship with Link can be seen as an illustration of black women's empowerment in the positive light. However, it also capitalizes the black matriarch stereotype. Jack Hill, the director of the film, displays black female agency by connecting it to black male disempowerment. Suitably, Link is an emasculated black man, who seeks to

achieve some form of social power. He is filled with frustration and cowardice; therefore, he is in constant need of his older sister Foxy to either rescue him or guide him. Foxy is a maternal figure to Link, the continuous mothering and nagging she directs towards him shows his masculine weakness and incapability, which is typical of black matriarchy. (Dunn 124-125)

Although Foxy is the title character and the center of the film, she still lives in a systemically patriarchal world. Thus, her identity as a black woman is essentially related to her femininity and sexuality which is ultimately shaped by the erotic white male perspective. Hence, despite it being unintended, it is only expectable to witness stereotypical representations of black women in the film. Foxy embodies several stereotypes, starting with the black matriarch depicted in her relationship with her brother Link, the sapphire or angry black woman when executing her revenge and finally, the jezebel when it comes to coercing others to help her achieve her goals using her femininity. (Graham 67)

Unlike *Coffy* that has a group of white and black men as villains, *Foxy Brown* has Katherine wall. Waddell (2009) assumes that director Jack Hill attempted to avoid any accusations of misogyny by having all the degrading deeds that happen to Foxy be approved by Miss Katherine. When Foxy's plans of demolishing Katherine's criminal organization from the inside are exposed, she is captured, tortured and sexually assaulted under Katherine's supervision. Katherine then orders her henchmen to send her to the "Ranch", a filthy isolated farm, where she is tied, whipped, injected with heroin and raped multiple times by two dirty racists. Guerrero notes that the Ranch represents a visual reference to a plantation; while the rape scene evokes memories of black women's condition during slavery. The jezebel image is perpetuated when Steve, Katherine's lover, asks Katherine rhetorically "The Ranch? Now you know what the boys at the Ranch would do with her?"

and Katherine replies “she’ll probably love it”; which implies that Foxy being black is probably hypersexual and therefore, would enjoy the sexual assault. (Mask 96)

Despite the excessive exploitation of sex and violence, along with the perpetuation of stereotypes related to black femininity, *Foxy Brown* effectively provides a blueprint for future “revenge-vigilante” films. Moreover, Pam Grier originated the strong, independent black action heroine. (Waddell 133) Some scholars on the other hand argue that Grier’s lead characters redefined black femininity by illustrating empowering, confident and liberated heroines who fight crime in their community. Grier speaks of the 1970s and says:

... was a time of freedom and women saying that they needed empowerment. There was more empowerment and self-discovery than any other decade I remember. All across the country, a lot of women were Foxy Brown and Coffy. They were independent, fighting to save their families, not accepting rape or being victimized.... This was going on all across the country. I just happened to do it on film. I don't think it took any great genius or great imagination. I just exemplified it, reflecting it to society. (qtd.in Sims)

Grier acknowledges the influence of the political climate on her roles, Black Nationalism, black feminism and womanism. Additionally, she dismisses accusations and criticism of the negative connotation her characters have on black women. She notes that her characters are a recreation of influential women she had in her life. (Sims 60-68)

8. Conclusion

The Blaxploitation boom was the outcome of the political and cultural progress that African Americans achieved. Significantly, black audiences were excited to view black-oriented films that fully humanize people of color. Thus, the release of *Sweet Sweetback's*

Baadassss Song (1971), *Shaft* (1971) and *Superfly* (1972) garnered plenty of attention and gained massive support from Black Nationalist youth. However, it also evoked criticism resulting in complete disapproval of the genre due to its extreme glorification of violence, drugs and obscenity, which eventually led to the genre's demise.

Blaxploitation films introduce the black female action lead to the cinemas. Films such as *Coffy* (1973) and *Foxy Brown* (1974) provided a template for future films when it came to the vigilante and revenge themes. Not to mention, the films presented the black audiences for the first time with black centered films along with tough and assertive heroines, after long years of supporting servitude roles and mammies. However, while the films empower women and portray African Americans in a different light than what they were habituated to, they still prove to be heavily imbedded with negative stereotypes of black femininity.

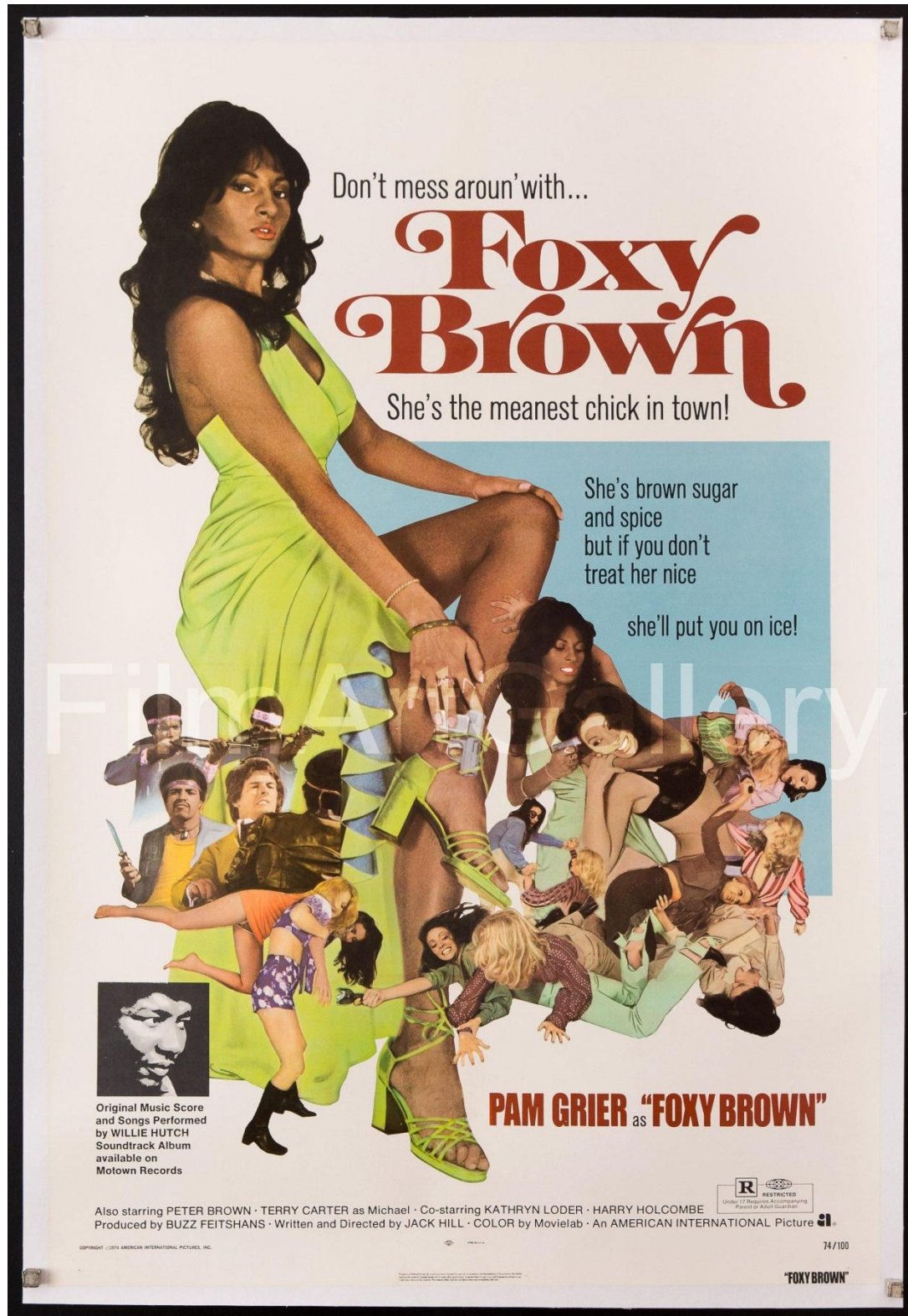


Figure 2: The Original Theatrical Poster for *Foxy Brown* (1974)

General Conclusion

This research discussed the nature of black female representation in Blaxploitation films by exploring the notion of black femininity and stereotypes related to it. Essentially, femininity refers to the set of socially constructed attitudes expected to be present within women. However, while there is no clear definition of black femininity, it is common that it does not abide by the Eurocentric perspective of it; mainly because of black women's unique experiences. Black women were part of two marginalized groups in the American society, that being women and people of color. Therefore, they underwent a double sided oppression in the sense of their blackness and their femininity. Significantly, various stereotypes were linked to black femininity throughout history, most of which are degrading to black women's identity. Evidently, Blaxploitation cinema capitalized on these stereotypes, portraying black women as hypersexual, promiscuous and violent.

Blaxploitation films represent Hollywood's financial saving grace in the 1970s. While the films appealed to an audience of predominantly black youth and adolescents, it stirred continuous waves of backlash from the black adult activists. The genre lives up to its name as it exploits the black community and appropriates negative images of black people, specifically black women who have been stamped with degrading stereotypes in the majority of these films. However, one cannot deny the impact these films had on the African American film representation and specifically that of women. Although the genre employed common stereotypes of black womanhood, it introduced and normalized black women in the leading position. Moreover, iconic films *Coffy* (1973) and *Foxy Brown* (1974) provided a blueprint of the action heroine as well as the revenge theme for future films.

Women were no longer mammies and slaves; nevertheless, they remained as jezebels, sapphires and matriarchs. Some may argue that Pam Grier's characters Coffy and Foxy re-

established notions of black femininity, recovered black female sexuality, embraced black beauty and rejected the Eurocentric delicacy. However, in doing so, these characters indirectly embodied traditional racist stereotypes that black women suffer from.

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ملخص

كان تمثيل النساء السوداوات في سينما البلاكسبلويتايشن موضوع نقاش بين مؤرخي السينما والنقاد منذ السبعينيات. قبل ظهور البلاكسبلويتايشن تم اختيار النساء السوداوات للظهور في ادوار ثانوية ومع ذلك تغيرت الحالة بعد ظهور هذا النوع وذلك نتيجة تطور الظروف الاجتماعية والسياسية والثقافية لمجتمع السود. تم منح النساء السوداوات أدواراً أكثر تنوعاً كشخصيات رئيسية بدلاً من مجرد شخصيات ثانوية. ولكن رغم ذلك فقد تم التشكيك في مصداقية هذا النوع لما نشره من الصور النمطية التي صور بها النساء الأمريكيات من أصل أفريقي وشكك العلماء في مساهمة هذه الأفلام في تحسين تمثيل النساء السوداوات في هوليوود. يهدف هذا البحث إلى التعرف على طبيعة تمثيل النساء السوداوات في سينما البلاكسبلويتايشن من خلال تحليل فيلمين بارزين و يتعلق الامر بفيلم كوفي من سنة 1973 و فوكسي براون من سنة 1974. علاوة على ذلك يسعى البحث إلى تحديد الصور النمطية الرئيسية للأثوية السوداء التي تجسدها الأفلام وتتحداهها. كما تحاول الاعتراف بالمساهمة التي قدمتها هذه الأفلام للنساء الأمريكيات من أصول أفريقية في صناعة السينما. وبالتالي فإن هذا البحث يتبع منهجاً تفسيرياً بمعنى أنه يتعامل مع التجربة الاجتماعية والإنسانية لمجموعة معينة. كذلك يعتمد البحث على تحليل محتوى الأفلام المختارة ومصادرها الأولية والثانوية ذات الصلة كما أنه يوظف نظريات النسوية السوداء والنسوية السينمائية. وجد البحث أن أفلام البلاكسبلويتايشن تفرط في إدامة الصور النمطية المهينة للأثوية السوداء. ولكن مع ذلك فقد ساهموا في بناء شخصيات نسائية سوداء قوية على الشاشة.