Western Media’s Commodification and Consumption of African Women: A Review of Three News Channels.
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Abstract

Historically, western media perpetuate ideas about race and ethnicity that marginalize women of color, particularly African women. Beginning with the ‘savage’ and promiscuous images during colonial era and moving to images of despair, deprivation and helplessness represented in contemporary news and print media, western views continue to reproduce distorted images of African women. These images provide a rather complicated and problematic relationship between the representations of African women in western media, and western notions of self. These complications and (mis)representations are not incidental. They mutate in the several contradictions and ambivalence through which Africa is generally perceived as “primitive”. In this configuration, African women are not just homogenized, they are ‘commodified’ and consumed by western audiences. This homogenization effectively ignores the agency and variations of African women whose identities and realities do not fit into western media representations and discourses on them.

In examining images of African women on National Geographic Channel (NGC), Cable News Network (CNN), British Broadcast Corporation (BBC), and other news media, I argue that these images valorize western “masculine gaze, and dichotomously define African women, not just against western women, but through a nexus of deprivation, and “primitivism”. This paper attempts to problematize these homogenized and Eurocentric media images that shape western perceptions of African women. Drawing upon postcolonial feminists’ perspectives, the central purpose of this paper is to explicate the cultural implications of depicting African women as homogenous helpless victims of their cultures; and to discuss how/why cultural hegemony has become so pervasive in western media.

Keywords: African women, postcolonial feminism, western media, representations, cultural hegemony, CNN, BBC, and National Geographic Channel (NGC).

Introduction

Western media representation of African women, and the continent, remains highly problematic and distorted. Images of African women have continuously become objects to be consumed by western audiences. While the impact of colonialism on the current conditions in Africa is ignored, the colonial narratives of barbaric savages, wanton sexuality, and imperial othering still very much permeate the media representations of African women. Given that images of Africa makes it into the Western media in times of wars, crises, and/or disasters, the images that is entrenched in Western audiences’ minds is that of Africa as inferior and still in need of foreign assistance. The discourse surrounding the representation of African women in
western media is explicitly coded racially and ethnically. Africa is often coded as “dilemma” which generates crises and problems for African femininity.

Gilman (1985) and Spurr (1993) have documented the strategic use of African women to further establish and propagate the idea of African difference and inferiority during the colonial time. While colonialism might seem a long time ago yet its impact continue to play a significant role in media depictions of African women. Moving on from the shameful colonial history of exploitation in Africa, and the sexualizing of African women and their reduction to sexual slaves, this paper interrogates contemporary rescripting of African women as disease carriers and destitute. African women have not only become objects for Western consumption, the media have commodified them by ascribing to them markers that create an “us” versus “them” divide. Similarly, the images that are regularly shown in the news media clearly attest to the power asymmetries between Africa and the Western world. For the current analysis of media commodification and consumption of African women, I have chosen the postcolonial feminist framework, particularly literatures by Spivak and Mohanty. This framework, which explicates the emergence of a scrutinizing western gaze in relation to the ‘other’, proves to be useful in studying western depiction of African women. I suggest that for the purpose of clarity that postcolonial feminism speaks to the realities of African women. Thus this study seeks to critically examine Western media images of African women from the perspective of postcolonial feminism.

When investigating images in the media, it is pertinent to consider the different media as well as their varying target audiences. I have chosen to analyze the portrayals of African women on such channels as CNN, NGC, and BBC, due to their specific target audience. CNN provides for an interesting case study because its narratives about African women are stories that center
on war, crises, and diseases. National Geographic compliments CNN with its portrayal of African women’s “exotic” cultures. I suggest that news media, unlike talk shows, is characterized by one-sided story that only echoes the voice of the narrator while undermining the voices of the participants. At the same time, the production of documentaries on African women is geared towards entertainment for western audiences.

In July 2005, CNN aired an hour long documentary “Can we save them?”, which was hosted by Christiane Amanpour. There is no doubt that “Can we save them” implores the rhetoric of western benevolence. The focus of this documentary was on HIV and other diseases which portrayed the disease merely as an African problem, and burden for African women either as carriers, victims or grandmothers catering for HIV orphaned children. While there is no denying the impact of HIV in Africa yet this documentary is conjured and conditioned through imperialistic hierarchies. The documentary portrayed HIV as a disease “over there” and not a global problem thereby subjecting Africans, particularly African women, as disease carriers. As is evident in the title of the documentary, CNN adopted an imperialistic approach which serves to further expound upon the “us” versus “them” divide. The use of ‘we’ and ‘them’ in the title reiterates the fact that CNN speaks from a western perspective and not only connotes HIV as an African women’s biggest problem but also portrays them as helpless victims waiting for the messianic help of the west. It is important to note that the stories on African women featured on CNN often cite unconfirmed sources or controversial topics as fact about African women.

In August 2007, NGC featured a program entitled “Taboo”. This program was intended to point out the diversity of cultural values. While women from other parts of the world were featured in the documentary, no other ethnic group was shown stark naked. The producers not only showed naked African women baring their breasts, they defended it as African culture.
When Western women were shown in the same documentary, their breasts were covered unlike those of the African women. The question is how does this image differ from the media perception of what and how African culture should be? Does showing naked breasts of African women convey any message other than the barbarism of African culture? Many of the programs on NGC continue to perpetuate unreal images of an African culture that exists only in the imperial mind.

From the documentary on the 1994 Rwandan Genocide to more recent programs, BBC continues to depict African women in the same light British colonialist did many centuries ago. While the crises in certain African countries are not directly linked to western influences, the problem is that Western media assume sole authority on narrating the stories which is often distorted to portray the west as a “messiah”. In a documentary on “African women and Wildlife” aired on BBC in December 2006, there were photos of African women alongside wild animals. One begins to question the motive behind such images and what (if any) positive meaning can be drawn from that. Many of the programs and documentary featured on BBC, CNN, or NGC often include narratives that suggest ways to address the problems stated. My main research questions in this study are as follows: What is the purpose of the stories featuring African women? What is the cultural implication of depicting African women as homogenous helpless victims? How might these documentaries be evaluated from the standpoint of Postcolonial feminism? The study will answer these questions by conducting a content analysis of the aforementioned programs on African women featured in these three news channels. In the next section, I will focus on significant insight postcolonial feminism would provide in examining media distortions of African women’s realities.
Postcolonial Feminism and Western Commodification and Consumption of African Women

The postcolonial explanations on the commodification and consumption of African women by Western media are useful in understanding the images of African women. The global power dynamics involved in the construction of media images makes it easy to “other” the non-Western. What is currently happening in most African countries is so different from what the Western media wants the entire world to believe. Nnaemeka (2005) argues that the eagerness of the West to erect the “we” versus “them” hierarchy objectifies and inferiorizes African women. What has always been lacking in the portrayal of African women in Western news media is the space for these women to participate in the narratives as producers of knowledge rather than as passive participants. Media choices of featuring poor women in run-down neighborhoods (slums) across Africa is a calculated attempt to sell the stereotypical images of despair and destitution that has become part of the Western narrative about African people.

The systematic erasure of African women’s voices in CNN, BBC, and NGC documentaries is reminiscent of Western denigration of African life-styles. There is no question that these media images influence Western feminists’ scholarship. For example, media organizations have produced documentaries on female circumcision which for a long time dominated Western feminism ideas about African women. This shows that while the media might be a non-academic institution, even academics have become influenced by what is shown on their TV set. In Under Western Eyes, Mohanty (1986) points out that Western feminist scholarship have tended to produce monolithic, universalizing and essentializing constructions of women in the Third World. This analysis is very relevant to understanding how the Western media has grouped African women into one homogenous group such that most news captions always refer to Africa as if it is a country of one ethnic group. Obviously, being African, I am
not too aware of the unrealistic depictions of African women and the persistent primitive status that anything African occupies in Westerners’ mind. In contemporary times, the western mind is fed with Western voices that frame the African subject on CNN, BBC, NGC, and a host of other news channels. In the constant effort to assert its power and control, the West uses the media to develop and disseminate stereotypes of the dominated.

I argue that the deliberate distortions of the realities of the dominated are a means to tout such unreal images as evidence of the incapacity of the dominated. Such are the conditions under which the commodification and consumption of African women occur. By carefully assuming an imperial position, the West further sustains and perpetuates its power. Through the control of most of the world’s technologies of communication, the superiority of Western womanhood continues to be glorified alongside the helplessness of African womanhood. Thus, the mere question “can the subaltern African woman speak?” is a categorical assertion to give African women a voice in Western news media. Borrowing from Antonio Gramsci idea of subalternity, Spivak’s statement “Can the Subaltern Speak”, questions why the non-Western cannot speak for themselves, and why they must be represented by the West. The point is not that the subaltern does not speak but rather can she be heard. As the likes of CNN, BBC, and NGC continue to dominate the discussion on African women, it becomes apparent that the issue is not the inability of African women to speak but rather the dominant control the West has over international news media.

**Conclusion**

This paper has provided a brief summary of an ongoing research. A lot of questions come to one’s mind while conducting a research of this nature. The documentaries mentioned above
have ideological affinities with imperial mythologies. Accordingly, African womanhood constructed as a burden and outside of normalcy exists in these documentaries as a category to measure against a Western normative womanhood. I am still not persuaded that BBC’s depiction of African women alongside wild animals is acceptable. I also understand that most countries in Africa have economic challenges but poverty should not be a reason for exploitation, that is, people should not be paid to strike specific poses for broadcast purposes. One of the major challenges experienced by African feminist scholars is that the news media has become somewhat of a ‘fact machine’ in many consumers mind. Few watch CNN, NGC or BBC TV news with any critical sense. Thus, embedded in the narratives of CNN’s “Can we Save Them”, NGC’s “Taboo”, and BBC’s African Women and Wild life, is the incapacitation of African femininity, and disavowal through constant reminders of reworking of difference.
Bibliography


