

CHALLENGING INEQUALITY: ANALYZING THE PORTRAYAL OF BLACK WOMEN WORKERS IN 'SELF MADE' THROUGH FEMINIST STYLISTIC LENS

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ABSTRACT

The physical appearance, particularly beauty standards influenced by social constructs, significantly impacts a woman's self-esteem and employment opportunities. Unfortunately, Black women, particularly African-American women, often experience marginalization due to societal beauty standards, racial biases, and gender discrimination within patriarchal settings. In light of this, our research uses the miniseries "Self-Made" as a case study to examine how the dialogues spoken by the characters reflect the experiences of Black women workers. This study employs a qualitative descriptive research method with a feminist stylistic approach, following Sara Mills' methodology. The findings reveal that at the lexical analysis level, gender manifestations are evident through the use of marked linguistic expressions, where women are depicted as "other," subordinated, and marginalized in the gender hierarchy. At the phrase and sentence level, linguistic choices, including pre-established phrases, presuppositions, metaphors, jokes, and transitivity preferences, indicate the objectification, gender inequality, and dehumanization of Black women. At the discourse analysis level, the research reveals that Black women are not only objectified but also experience racial discrimination. In conclusion, this study analyzes how language represents Black women in their intersectional identities and underscores the importance of addressing bias in media depictions to move towards a more inclusive society.

1. INTRODUCTION

Physical appearance, specifically attractiveness, significantly influences a woman's self-confidence, shaped largely by societal norms and values. Bungin (2007) notes that these norms often prioritize features such as light skin, a slim physique, and conventional beauty ideals, including well-groomed hair. In professional settings, women who align with these beauty standards tend to experience greater acceptance and fewer obstacles in securing employment, sometimes even exceeding the job's requirements. Raissa's (2020) research indicates that physical attractiveness is often considered essential by organizations, as it fosters a favorable first impression. Unfortunately, these societal norms around beauty perpetuate inequalities, especially for women who do not fit conventional standards, such as Black women (Degaf et al., 2019). As a result, Black women face dual challenges in professional environments—navigating both gender-



based discrimination and racial biases, while also contending with patriarchal and racial stereotypes.

The standardization of women's appearance and racial categorization is not only prevalent but also actively promoted by the media in contemporary culture (Kafi & Degaf, 2021). The mass media, including advertising, news, and films, wields symbolic and persuasive power, shaping public perceptions and behaviors. Films and miniseries, as audio-visual mediums, convey narratives through visual and linguistic techniques, often embedding ideological messages. These narratives reflect and reinforce societal norms and values, as Sobur (2004) suggests, allowing films to communicate specific ideas and perspectives. The miniseries "Self-Made," available on Netflix since 2020, is an exemplary work addressing gender discrimination and the influence of race on beauty standards. It centers on the life of Madam C.J. Walker, an African-American entrepreneur who became the first Black millionaire in the United States by empowering herself and other Black women through the haircare industry. The series illustrates the systemic inequities and prejudice faced by African-American women, rooted in the intersections of race and gender (Chafe, 1976).

This study aims to examine the representation of Black women workers in "Self-Made" through the lens of feminist stylistics, drawing on Sara Mills' (1995) framework. Feminist stylistic analysis, as Mills (1995) outlines, provides insights into how women are linguistically represented, combining principles from feminism, critical discourse analysis, and Foucault's theory of power dynamics. Montoro (2014) emphasizes that feminist stylistics explores how linguistic choices in texts reflect gender values and how readers interpret these connotations. By analyzing the language and dialogues in "Self-Made," this study seeks to uncover how gender stereotypes and biases are constructed and perpetuated, contributing to a broader understanding of the intersection of language, gender, and race in media portrayals of African-American women within the historical context of the feminist movement.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Stylistics, or "literary linguistics" (Burke, 2017), involves the examination and interpretation of literary works, focusing on linguistic patterns and the relationship between language and literature (Giovanelli & Harrison, 2022). It considers how elements like time, space, culture, and cognition influence language production in both literature and everyday communication (Simpson, 2004). This field uses linguistic theory to analyze the structural components of texts, recognizing the creative use of language in various forms of discourse, such as advertising, journalism, music, and informal conversations (Simpson, 2004). Stylistics today extends beyond analyzing individual linguistic elements to include cultural and historical contexts, often using empirical research to explore how texts are received in different social settings (Giovanelli & Harrison, 2022). This approach continues to expand, offering valuable insights into the relationship between language and literary interpretation.

Within stylistics, feminist stylistics, pioneered by Sara Mills, has emerged as a sub-discipline. This approach combines critical discourse analysis with a focus on how conversational texts, particularly in media, portray women (Simpson, 2004). Grounded in the broader feminist movement, feminist stylistics aims to challenge and reject various forms of oppression rooted in patriarchal culture. Mills (1995) emphasizes the importance of cultural factors in Western society that categorize individuals by gender. Feminist stylistics goes beyond identifying gender



disparities in texts to uncover implicit messages and analyze how readers respond to them, addressing broader theoretical issues connected to the text's elements.

Several studies have employed Sara Mills' feminist stylistics to analyze the representation of women in various media. For instance, Furoida (2020) explored the representation of women in beauty brand video ads, highlighting positive portrayals of women as empowered agents. Kristina et al. (2019) examined the depiction of female CEOs in online media, revealing gender stereotypes and the dominance of men in leadership portrayals. Al-Zubaidi (2019) applied feminist stylistics to Iraqi folk proverbs, uncovering negative representations of women due to the prevalence of masculinity in Iraqi culture.

Other studies have utilized Mills' critical discourse analysis to examine the portrayal of women in films and television. Bado (2022) compared the portrayal of women in Indonesian and American films about marriage, while Talissa and Ayuningtyas (2021) analyzed feminist values in the film "Hidden Figures," which highlights the struggles of Black women against patriarchy in the workplace and education. Ayustin and Christine (2022) investigated gender discrimination in the series "Peaky Blinders," focusing on how women are portrayed as subjects, objects, and audience members. A recent study by Rachmadani et al. (2022) analyzed the film "Marlina the Murderer in Four Acts," focusing on the portrayal of female characters within the context of opposing patriarchal culture in Sumba. The aforementioned research jointly emphasizes the extensive applicability and significance of feminist stylistics in comprehending the intricacies of gender representation in diverse textual environments.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative approach to explore the lived experiences of Black women workers as depicted in the miniseries "Self-Made," which has been available on Netflix since 2020. Guided by Sara Mills' feminist stylistics theory (1995), the research focused on analyzing the spoken texts within the miniseries, allowing for a deep examination of language without the need for direct participant interaction. This method aligns with Rahardjo's (2021) findings on the increasing efficacy of digital technology for data collection and analysis, making it a suitable approach for this study.

The analysis began with a focus on the word level, where the researcher identified sexist language within the dialogue of the characters. Particular attention was given to elements like generic pronouns, androcentrism, and derogatory terms that perpetuate stereotypes and discriminatory representations of Black women. This initial step was crucial in understanding how language choices at the most granular level contribute to the broader narrative of marginalization and objectification within the miniseries.

Building on this, the study examined phrases and sentences to understand how these linguistic choices reinforced stereotypes and objectified Black women. The analysis also extended to the discourse level, where the roles and agency of Black women characters were assessed within the broader narrative. This examination aimed to determine whether these characters were portrayed as active subjects with agency or as passive objects, thus providing a comprehensive understanding of how the miniseries constructs and conveys its messages about Black women workers to its viewers.



4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Word Level Analysis, inspired by Sara Mills' theory, centers on the identification and examination of sexist language within the dialogue, aiming to comprehend the connections between these words and their connotations.

4.1 Word Level Analysis

In the Word Level Analysis section, Sara Mills' theory primarily focuses on identifying and examining sexist words in language and understanding the relationship between these words and their meanings.

4.1.1 Woman as the Marked form

The concept of "Woman as the marked form" aims to clarify that women, like men, have an identity or marked form within the context of gender production. The concept under discussion is exemplified in a particular scene within the miniseries, when Sarah, the protagonist, is depicted receiving a hairstyling session from Addie, an individual with expertise in the field of hair growth products. The conversation transpires in the following manner:

Example 1 (Episode: 1/Scene: 3/06.34)

Addie's customer: What do I say when a customer complains about the sulfur smell?

Addie: Smile and say, "That's how you know the product is working."

Sarah: I put it on at night. By morning, the smells mostly gone.

Addie: If a washerwoman like Sarah can figure it out, you all should have no problem convincing customers they'll look like me or you.

In this scene, Addie refers to Sarah as a "washerwoman," a term historically tied to lower-class domestic roles, which reinforces gender stereotypes by confining Sarah to a socially undervalued occupation. This label perpetuates the notion that women, especially Black women, are limited to certain roles, particularly those involving domestic work, reflecting intersecting oppressions rooted in racism, classism, and gender biases (Collins, 2009). Unlike men, who are often referred to in neutral terms like "washers," women are frequently assigned gendered labels that diminish their status. This use of language not only highlights the unequal positioning of women in the workforce but also shows how entrenched gender expectations are perpetuated through language. The scene underscores the role of media in reinforcing traditional gender roles and stereotypes, emphasizing the need to challenge such language and promote gender-neutral terms as essential steps toward dismantling these stereotypes and achieving greater gender equality (Mills, 1995).

4.1.2 Naming and Androcentrism

The examination of "Naming and Androcentrism" focuses on the phenomenon of women relinquishing their surnames upon marriage, predominantly as a result of patriarchal cultural conventions. This occurrence parallels the trajectory of the protagonist in the miniseries, an African American lady called Sarah Breedlove, who, upon marrying Charles Joseph Walker, adopts the



appellation Mrs. Walker. The manifestation of this element becomes apparent in the ensuing dialogue between Mr. Ransom and Sarah:

Example 2 (Episode: 1/Scene: 17/30.58)

Mr. Ransom: Mrs. Walker, business can be ruthless. Especially for a colored woman.

According to Mills (1995), the system of names is significantly shaped by patrilineal inheritance customs, wherein wealth and property are conventionally transmitted along the male lineage, from father to son. Consequently, the lineage and family name are typically associated with the male figure. In contrast, women often have to convey their marital status through titles like 'Miss' or 'Mrs.', while men are not marked in a similar manner.

The analysis includes a discussion on "Naming and Androcentrism" to provide light on the depiction of black women in the miniseries and the societal standards that influence their sense of self. This observation emphasizes the impact of patriarchal cultural norms on naming practices and emphasizes the importance of questioning and challenging these norms in order to foster gender equality and inclusivity.

4.1.3 The Semantic Derogation of Woman

Mills' concept of "The Semantic Derogation of Woman" refers to how certain gender-specific terms carry negative connotations when applied to women. Cameron (1993) supports this by showing that in many languages, including English, the male form often has positive associations, while the female form has negative ones. For example, the term "lady" is the feminine equivalent of "lord," but while "lord" retains its status as a term of respect, "lady" can be used in a more casual, sometimes diminishing way. This distinction is evident in a conversation where Mr. Washington, a successful entrepreneur, addresses Sarah.

Example 3 (Episode: 2/Scene: 14/42.23)

Mr. Washington : I would rather endorse a palm reader than a hair culturalist, Mrs. Walker, and the little outburst in there is precisely the reason why you ladies need to be kept in your place.

Mr. Washington's use of "ladies" here reflects his belief that women should be confined to traditional gender roles, discouraging them from seeking authority or influence. This echoes historical patterns of employment discrimination against women, where they were often viewed as subordinate to men (Ghodsee, 2018). The use of "lady" in this context reinforces gender hierarchies and highlights the importance of critically examining language choices. The contrast between "lord" and "lady" underscores how language shapes societal beliefs and perpetuates gender inequality, emphasizing the need to advocate for gender-neutral terms that promote equality and challenge outdated power structures.



4.1.4 Endearment

The term "Endearment" pertains to the utilization of verbal expressions that convey feelings of fondness or compassion towards an individual. According to Mills (1995), lexical expressions associated with fondness may possess an outwardly pleasant and consoling quality, although they can occasionally be employed in a covert manner to exert influence on individuals. These phrases are not just limited to the male gender; they are frequently used when referring to individuals of the female gender as well. In the realm of manipulation, persuasion, or control, it is common for men to utilize endearing language when engaging in conversation with their female counterparts. The aforementioned phenomenon is readily apparent in an exchange between Sarah and her spouse, Mr. C.J. Walker, wherein the latter endeavors to convince her and articulate his dissent towards her ambitious notions.

Example 4 (Episode:1/Scene:13/24.08)

C.J: I think we make a mistake with moving here. Gotta figure something out. Quick. Cause we're all almost out of money. The new hotel downtown. They hiring. I figure you and me we can go down there, and I could be a bellhop, you can do laundry.

Sarah: You don't just plant a seed and expect fruit the next day. The colored woman here got to get used to the idea of somebody else doing their hair, that's all.

C.J: Baby, you know I'll always love your big ideas, but...

Sarah: I'm not going back to Laundry.

In this interaction, C.J. uses the term "baby" to express his dissent against Sarah's choices, subtly asserting authority and implying that she relies on his guidance. This term not only reflects the hierarchical dynamics in their relationship but also serves to undermine Sarah's decision-making ability, reinforcing his dominance. According to Mills, such terms of endearment are often used more frequently towards women, perpetuating unequal power relations rooted in patriarchal structures. Analyzing the use of "baby" in this context reveals how language can reflect and reinforce gender imbalances, highlighting the need to challenge these patterns to promote more equitable and respectful communication.

4.2 Phrase/Sentence Level Analysis

The analysis at the phrase and sentence level goes beyond the mere identification of individual words that have sexist implications. It entails a thorough examination of how these connotations are expressed through certain phrases and sentences. This study takes into account not only the contextual factors but also the historical and background knowledge that serves as the foundation for these linguistic decisions. The objective of this study is to offer a thorough comprehension of the portrayal of black women's experiences in the miniseries, focusing on the intricacies of language and discourse.



4.2.1 Ready-made Phrases

The notion of 'Ready-made Phrases' refers to sentences or phrases that encompass assertions which exhibit sexist attitudes towards women. Numerous occurrences of such assertions were identified within the depictions and conversations shown in the program. The above fragment of dialogue serves as an illustrative example in support of the aforementioned point.

Example 1 (Episode: 2/Scene:12/37.43)

Mrs. Washington: Oh, we started at 1985 when the awful man denigrated Negro womanhood in the Missouri newspaper.

Mrs. Thomas: He said that all Negro women are either prostitutes, liars, or thieves.

In this dialogue, Mrs. Washington and Mrs. Thomas discuss a derogatory statement from a Missouri newspaper that labels all Black women as "prostitutes, liars, or thieves." This offensive statement perpetuates harmful stereotypes that have long been used to demean and devalue Black women, linking their racial and gender identities in a negative light. The use of such pejorative terminology not only insults Black women but also reinforces racist and sexist biases. This exchange illustrates how media can propagate damaging stereotypes, contributing to the marginalization of specific racial and gender groups. It underscores the need to challenge and reject such harmful language, advocating for more respectful and accurate portrayals of Black women.

Example 2 (Episode: 2/Scene:14/40.00)

Sarah: Sir, I need your endorsement. Jobs are at stake.

Mr. Washington: In a company that shames Negroes into Eurocentric beauty standards?

Sarah: I want us to feel beautiful too, not look white.

Mr. Washington: Negroes can't afford to waste money on cosmetics.

Sarah: That's why I pay my employees well.

Mr. Washington: So Negro women can out-earn Negro men? How can we be taken seriously if our women surpass us?

Sarah: It's not a competition. We all need to be lifted.

Mr. Washington: The Negro man needs lifting first. I'd rather endorse a palm reader than a hair culturalist, Mrs. Walker.

In this dialogue, Mr. Washington dismisses Sarah's business as trivial, accusing it of promoting Eurocentric beauty standards and suggesting that her work is unworthy of respect. His remarks not only marginalize the contributions of Black women in the beauty industry but also reinforce harmful stereotypes about economic hardship in the Black community, implying that beauty products are unnecessary luxuries. The dismissive term "hair culturalist" further undermines Sarah's efforts, highlighting how race and gender intersect to devalue Black women's labor. This exchange emphasizes the need to challenge such language and stereotypes to ensure a more equitable and respectful portrayal of Black women's contributions and aspirations.



4.2.2 Presupposition and Inferences

Based on Mills (1995), Presupposition is an assumption which connected in the relevant situation to the intent of the writer or speaker with general knowledge and the inference is as its conclusion from presupposition. In several scenes featured in the "Self Made" miniseries, the researcher found several forms of presupposition and inference as contained in the dialogue text excerpts below.

Example 3 (Episode: 1/Scene: 3/07.35)

Sarah: All I am saying is when a customer looks at my hair, they'll know they're seeing what your product can do.

Addie: Colored woman will do anything to look like me. Even if deep down, they know they can't.

This conversation reveals multiple presuppositions. First, Addie's statement assumes that Black women inherently feel inferior about their physical appearance compared to lighter-skinned women, suggesting a desire to conform to Eurocentric beauty ideals. This perpetuates the harmful notion that Black women's attractiveness is lesser, reinforcing colorism and societal preferences for lighter skin. Such assumptions can have damaging effects on the self-esteem of Black women who do not align with these standards.

This conversation reveals several presuppositions. Addie's statement assumes that Black women feel inferior about their appearance compared to lighter-skinned women, suggesting a desire to conform to Eurocentric beauty ideals. This perpetuates harmful notions of colorism, reinforcing the idea that Black women's attractiveness is lesser. It also implies that Black women are less suited for representation in the beauty industry, reflecting a bias that excludes them from being the face of beauty products. The dialogue highlights the prejudice Black women face in industries dominated by Eurocentric standards and underscores the need to challenge these norms. Promoting diverse and inclusive beauty standards is crucial for fostering a more equitable understanding of attractiveness and empowering women of color.

A statement related to the conversation above is also found in the dialogue excerpt that contains presuppositions and inferences. It is found when Sarah talks to her daughter because she is annoyed with the difference in people's treatment of white and black women.

Example 4 (Episode: 3/Scene: 21/41.06)

Sarah said: If you're white. You're all right. If you're brown, stick around. If you're black, get back. Ain't nobody looking at me that way. Not your daddy, C.J...

Sarah's statement encapsulates the harsh realities of colorism and systemic racism, suggesting that white women inherently enjoy privilege, brown-skinned women face some challenges but still have opportunities, while Black women encounter the greatest obstacles. This reflects the deep-seated biases that marginalize Black women, placing them at the bottom of the social and professional hierarchy. The dialogue underscores the pervasive impact of colorism,



where lighter skin is equated with higher status and more opportunities. Sarah's words highlight the urgent need to confront and dismantle these ingrained biases to create a more equitable society.

4.2.3 Metaphor

Metaphors, as defined by Max Black (1979), are powerful linguistic tools that reveal underlying gender biases by drawing analogies between different domains. Mills' analysis shows a stark contrast in how metaphors are used to describe men and women.

Example 5 (Episode: 1/Scene: 2/02.54)

Davis: You look like a mangy dog.

Sarah: Baby, please don't go, please Davis...

In this dialogue, Davis likens Sarah to a "mangy dog," using a metaphor that harshly criticizes her appearance by comparing her to an unattractive and neglected animal. This comparison reflects society's tendency to judge women primarily on their looks, reducing their worth to their physical attributes. The metaphor not only objectifies Sarah but also reinforces harmful beauty standards and stereotypes about women. Such language perpetuates gender biases, emphasizing the need to challenge these stereotypes and advocate for language that respects and values women beyond their appearance. The dialogue in "Self-Made" underscores the importance of using language that promotes a more equitable and respectful portrayal of all individuals, regardless of gender.

4.2.4 Jokes and Humor

The selected conversation snippet from the film "Self-Made" exemplifies a comedic and self-deprecating scene occurring during a business presentation directed towards potential investors. The humor displayed in this particular instance serves as an indicator of the underlying dynamics and gendered expectations present in the relationship between Sarah and C.J.

Example 6 (Episode: 2/Scene: 1/01.55)

An investor: Curious that you decided to open a factory for, um... feminine products.

Sarah: It is my Idea. C.J in charge of the ads.

C.J: Well, now I do more than ads, now.

Sarah: Of Course. I did not mean to suggest otherwise. CJ's been such an asset to my company.

C.J: Now I see who wear the pants in this family.

All investor: (Laughing).

In this scene, an investor awkwardly comments on Sarah's factory, prompting her to affirm that the idea was hers, while C.J. adds that his role has grown beyond advertising. C.J. then makes a self-deprecating joke, "Now I see who wears the pants in this family," a phrase traditionally linked to authority and control within relationships. Although intended as humor, the joke hints at C.J.'s discomfort with Sarah's dominant role in both their personal and professional lives, and the



laughter from the investors reinforces the societal expectation that men should be in charge. This scene highlights how conventional gender roles persist, even through humor, and underscores the need to challenge these deeply ingrained norms to promote equality in relationships and opportunities, regardless of gender.

4.2.5 Transitivity Choices

Transitivity reveals the ideological message behind a text by analyzing the actions and roles of characters. It classifies experiences into six process types: material, mental, verbal, relational, behavioral, and existential (Halliday, 2004). Below are some phrases from the miniseries for examination.

Table Types of Participants and Process in the Transitivity Analysis System

No	Phrase/Sentence	Transitivity process	Actor	Affected
1	Baby, please don't go Davis	Material action intention	Male	Female
2	I'll always love your big ideas, but...	Relational process	Male	Female
3	I'm not going back to Laundry.	Material action intention	Female	Male
4	You gonna do what's best for this family. You hear?	Relational process	Male	Female
5	I am making it a point not to get involved with my husband's affairs.	Material action intention	Female	Female
6	He said that all Negro women are either prostitutes, liars, or thieves.	Behavioral Mental	Male	Female
7	We live in a man's world.	Relational Process	Female	Female
8	You're still in back, afraid to speak!	Material action intention	Female	Female
9	I've been silent most of my life	Material action intention	Female	Female
10	He took his genitals out and tried to force himself on me	Material action intention	Male	Female
11	I can't be silent anymore.	Material action intention	Female	Male
12	They are wasting their talents in the back.	Material action	Female	Female
13	Many of us fear harm from our own husbands.	Relational Process	Female	Female
14	I know our men have it hard, but so do our women.	Behavioral Mental	Female	Male
15	You care more about the Damn business! Then you care about us.	Behavioral Mental	Male	Female
16	You cheating on me with this business.	Behavioral Mental	Male	Female
17	You act like you forgot what a wife's supposed to do.	Behavioral Mental	Male	Female
18	You done forgot all about your husband!	Behavioral Mental	Male	Female
19	I am a man, and Dora knows it. That's why I slept with her.	Material Action Intention	Male	Female
20	All I've ever wanted was to help colored woman.	Behavioral Mental	Female	Male



21	I'm trying to build something with this business C.J	Material Action Intention	Female	Male
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The table provided outlines various phrases and sentences from the miniseries, identifying the transitivity processes involved, along with the actors and those affected. Among the phrases analyzed, four material actions are performed by female actors and impact other female characters, while three material actions by female actors affect male characters. Conversely, three material actions are performed by male actors, all of which negatively impact female characters. Material actions typically depict entities doing something to others, often positioning women as both active participants and passive victims. For example, men are shown leaving their wives, harassing women, and engaging in infidelity, which portrays women as passive victims in these scenarios. In contrast, when women are the actors, they are often depicted as resisting traditional roles, such as when Sarah refuses to return to work as a washerwoman or tries to build her business.

Mental behavior processes, which combine mental and material actions, further highlight gender biases. Five mental behavior processes involve male actors affecting women, often reinforcing gender stereotypes, such as when men express disdain for women's business ambitions. In contrast, only two mental behavior processes involve female actors influencing men, primarily in the context of seeking empowerment for Black women. This imbalance suggests that men are more frequently depicted as exerting influence over women, often through patriarchal attitudes. Relational and mental processes, which relate to states of being and emotions, also reflect the struggles of Negro women in a male-dominated world. Women's thoughts and feelings are often tied to their subjugation, with relational processes typically attributing men as the actors' affecting women. This distribution of transitivity processes underscores the portrayal of Negro women as both active agents and primary victims of racial and gender discrimination.

In conclusion, the transitivity analysis reveals that women, particularly Black women, are depicted as both actors and those most affected by the actions of others. While men are shown as actors, their actions predominantly have negative impacts on women, reinforcing the theme of racial and gender inequality throughout the miniseries.

4.3 Discourse Level Analysis

The analysis of women's representation in the media at the discourse level involves examining essential features such as characterization and roles, fragmentation, and focalization. These facets illuminate the portrayal of female characters, the construction of their narratives, and the prioritization of perspectives or experiences. In the present analysis, we shall undertake an examination of each of the aforementioned characteristics within the framework of the film "Self-Made."

4.3.1 Characterization and Roles

The characterization in "Self Made" clearly distinguishes between men and women, often reinforcing traditional gender roles. Women are portrayed as objects of beauty, valued primarily for their physical appearance, while men are depicted as strong, powerful protectors often linked



to their professions. Female characters are frequently shown in roles dependent on relationships or limited to jobs deemed suitable for women, such as secretarial work or laundry.

Example 1 (Episode: 3/Scene: 2/03.50)

C.J.: What do you think of when you think of American beauty? You think of this, the Gibson Girl sells everything from soap to soup, and she looks beautiful whatever she does. And every man wants her and every woman wants to be her.

Sarah: If you're white.

C.J.: Exactly. So, who represents the epitome of colored beauty? Yeah, let me introduce to you the Gibson Girl in Color. "Walker Girl".

This dialogue highlights how societal beauty standards have historically been exclusive, favoring white women like the "Gibson Girl," a symbol of idealized American beauty in that era. Sarah's response, "If you're white," points out the racial exclusion inherent in these standards. C.J. attempts to counter this by introducing the "Walker Girl," a representation of beauty for women of color, challenging the mainstream norms and empowering women like Sarah.

However, the reference to the "Gibson Girl" also reinforces the notion that women's roles were often confined to certain occupations, such as marketing domestic products. This reflects the broader societal constraints placed on women's careers, where gender stereotypes dictated what jobs were deemed appropriate for them. The scene illustrates the struggle of women, particularly women of color, to break free from these limitations and redefine their roles beyond traditional expectations.

4.3.2 Fragmentation

Fragmentation in the context of "Self Made" refers to the objectification of women's bodies, reducing them to physical traits meant to attract male attention. This concept is evident in a scene where Mr. Washington introduces Mrs. Addie Munroe to a group of businessmen.

Example 2 (Episode: 2/Scene: 8/20.01)

Mr. Washington: Miss Munroe is representative of the finest of Negro womanhood in business, and she is quite fetching to the eye, wouldn't you agree? Huh, Gentleman? All right, thanks, gentlemen.

The phrase "she is quite fetching to the eye" highlights how Mrs. Addie is objectified, her value reduced to her physical appearance rather than her professional achievements. The term "fetching" focuses solely on her attractiveness, reinforcing the notion that a woman's worth is tied to her ability to please the male gaze. This objectification suggests that Mrs. Addie's primary function in this context is to be visually appealing, rather than being recognized for her skills or contributions in business.

Additionally, the statement "representative of the finest of Negro womanhood in business" is problematic as it implies a singular, limited ideal for successful Black women in the corporate



world. This not only perpetuates racial and gender stereotypes but also confines the recognition of women of color to narrow and superficial standards.

The implications of this fragmentation extend beyond the scene, promoting gender inequality by emphasizing women's looks over their abilities. Such objectification reinforces societal expectations that women must conform to certain beauty standards, limiting their agency and opportunities. The dialogue in "Self Made" effectively illustrates how fragmentation upholds gender stereotypes, reducing women to objects of physical allure. This analysis aligns with Sara Mills' theory of fragmentation, which examines how women are portrayed as objects of beauty, with an emphasis on their physical traits. The scene also highlights the intersection of race and gender, where women of color face compounded stereotypes based on both their racial and gender identities.

4.3.3 Focalization

The concept of focalization is successfully exemplified in the given discussion through the various views and experiences of the characters, specifically Sarah and Mrs. Washington. Focalization functions as a mechanism to orient the reader's awareness towards comprehending the divergent perspectives of these two female characters in relation to their societal responsibilities and places.

Example 3 (Episode: 2/Scene: 15/37.00)

Sarah: I need investors for my factory, and your husband's endorsement could help. I'm having trouble reaching him.

Mrs. Washington: I don't get involved in my husband's affairs. We each have our own business.

Sarah: Where exactly is a woman's place? You're all accomplished women, smarter than your husbands. Why stay in the background?

Mrs. Washington: We live in a man's world. We choose to be here, near the kitchen, but together.

Sarah: It doesn't matter if you choose it. You're still in the back, afraid to speak!

Sarah is portrayed as a proactive and ambitious African American woman, determined to break free from traditional gender norms that have historically confined women, especially Black women, to domestic roles. Her focalization emphasizes her commitment to challenging societal expectations and fighting for recognition and equality in the business world. Through Sarah's perspective, the audience is encouraged to empathize with her struggle for change and empowerment.

In contrast, Mrs. Washington represents a more conservative and traditional viewpoint, one that was common among many Black women of her time. She accepts the male-dominated structure of society and chooses to maintain a low profile, avoiding involvement in her husband's affairs to preserve marital harmony. Focalizing through Mrs. Washington allows the audience to understand her motivations and the psychological conflicts faced by women who felt the need to



conform to societal expectations while finding solidarity in like-minded female communities. Her viewpoint underscores the challenges Black women faced in navigating societal constraints while preserving their relationships.

The dialogue also underscores the gender inequality and patriarchal systems that dominated society. Mrs. Washington's statement, "We live in a man's world," acknowledges the limitations placed on women, highlighting the concessions Black women made to maintain their positions and relationships. Through these contrasting focalizations, the text deepens the reader's understanding of the complex interplay between gender roles, cultural norms, and race, and the impact these had on Black women's experiences. Sarah's remark about men needing to hear ideas from other men further exposes the pervasive gender biases that hindered women's opportunities and progress. In this exchange, focalization serves as a powerful tool to illuminate the intricate challenges Black women faced in their pursuit of equality and recognition.

5. CONCLUSION

The miniseries "Self-Made" is significant for its portrayal of Black women, highlighting both the gender discrimination they face and the resilience they demonstrate in overcoming these challenges. Using Sara Mills' feminist framework, the analysis reveals how language perpetuates gender and racial biases, from marked expressions that depict women as "other" to sexist terminology, metaphors, and jokes that reinforce negative stereotypes. However, the film also presents positive representations, showing Black women as strong, ambitious, and capable of challenging societal norms. These positive portrayals act as a counterbalance to the discrimination depicted, emphasizing the importance of resilience and the ongoing fight for empowerment. The study underscores the crucial role language plays in shaping cultural attitudes and the need to challenge stereotypes while promoting equitable and empowering representations of women, particularly those of African descent.

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