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## Research Article



## The Colonial Spectacle: Sara Baartman and the Commodification of Black Bodies

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### Abstract

The body has always been used as a way of cultural expression and social scrutiny. In the case of marginalised groups like black women, their bodies do carry added significance because of slavery, colonial and sexual oppression, and exploitation. The narratives around their bodies have been based on

stereotypes and blatant racism. Their bodies have been commodified and fetishised for their 'exotic' features. They have been hypersexualized, characterized as deviant, and racially oppressed. This perpetuated a narrow view of what Black womanhood and sexuality meant. Black women's relationship with their own bodies is deeply intertwined with the dynamics of power, resistance, and oppression. At the heart of this hypersexualized black womanhood lies the story of Sara Baartman or Hottentot Venus. By shedding light on her story, this article seeks to explore the complexities of Black womanhood and sexuality, their historical roots, and their contemporary manifestations.

**Keywords:** Sara Bartman, Black woman, Hypersexuality, Body performance, Commodification, Colonial Spectacle, Gender and Race, Cultural Representation

Body performance is defined as a way in which individuals use their bodies to express and communicate cultural meanings. This can include rituals, dances, gestures, and other bodily practices that convey messages within a particular cultural context. Body performance with respect to black women refers to how their bodies are scrutinized, objectified, and stereotyped based on gender and racial biases. This leads to specific societal expectations and judgments geared towards them and their physical appearance, which is apparent through the stereotypes and representations in literature and media which in turn leads to systemic racism towards black women on the access to healthcare, education, and economic opportunities. Body performance also includes how black women navigate and respond to these expectations and judgments through acts of expression, style, hair, and other acts of bodily resistance. In Baartman's case, the body performance was forced and not voluntary. Her body is the main focus of her body performance in the context of racism, sexual exploitation, and colonialism. Her story is an example of how a black woman's body was commodified and exploited within the context of a sense of racial and sexual exploitation.

Sara (Saartje) Baartman was a Khoi Khoi woman from South Africa who was exhibited as a freak show attraction in Europe under the name Hottentot Venus (or Black Venus). Hottentot is a derogatory term used to refer to the indigenous people of South Africa. Sara had steatopygia, which meant there were excessive fat deposits in the buttocks and thighs naturally occurring among Khoikhoi people. On the day of her wedding, Dutch commandos killed her father and husband. She had no other option but to work as a domestic help/slave for white farmers in Cape Town until 1810 and there she worked for Peter Cezar. Henrik, along with a British surgeon named Alexander Dunlop, found themselves captivated by the physical attributes of Sara, especially her posterior and genitalia. They believed that showcasing her across Europe as part of a freak show exhibition could yield substantial financial gains. Somehow, they convinced her to go with them to Europe. Whether she had any choice in this or whether she saw this as an opportunity for economic emancipation is unknown.

Later that year, they boarded a ship with Sara for a three-month journey to Europe, never to return to her homeland again. Even though England had abolished the slave trade by then, the majority of black people who lived there were mostly slave- servants. Cezar offered to sell Sara, along with some giraffe skin, to Willaim Bullock, the keeper of the Art and Natural History Museum, but he bought the giraffe skin but rejected Sara.

She was later exhibited at a freak show in Piccadilly in front of paying spectators who poked and prodded her. Such shows capitalised on the Darwinian ideas of the relationship between animals and humans. These shows were notorious for labeling someone who didn't fit in or share the experience of the dominant culture as a 'freak' or 'other'. They were a means to showcase and verify the savagery and

primitiveness of the colonial populations and thereby reinforce the superiority of the colonisers or civilise master races.

Sara was used as a scientific display and as an object of ethno-pornographic gaze. Spectators flocked to see the new freak show in town. She was produced like a wild beast in a cage, ordered to come out and go back into her cage and move backward and forwards by her keeper, more like an animal in chains. She wore a skin tight flesh-colored costume with African beads and ostrich feathers and left little to the imagination. Abolitionist groups in England took up her case and filed for her release. Henrik Cezar claimed that she was there completely of her own will and got a fair share of the profits. Later, at the court, Sara testified that she was a willing participant. The case created a huge press controversy in the country.

In 1814, Sara was taken to France, where slavery was not yet abolished. Cezar sold Sara to an animal trainer named Ryu effectively as a slave, and he disappeared. Bartman was exhibited at Palais Royale. In Paris, the world-renowned Naturalists at the time took an interest in her case. Naturalists like Georges Cuvier, Geoffery Hilaire, and Blainville examined her and ordered artists to draw nude portraits of her, obviously without her consent. She was studied naked to examine her status as a “highly developed animal” and the “lowest exemplum of the human species.” She was also called the “missing link in the Great Chain of Being.”

Sara died a few months later in France. This was seen as an opportunity by the scientist to examine and dissect her to prove their theories. Cuvier dissected her body and said that her genitalia was ‘unlike’ any he had seen before. So it qualified, according to him, to deem her as monstrous or deviant or non-human. Her brain and genitals were preserved, and the findings were presented to the Academy of Sciences. A plaster cast of her body was also made, and it is preserved in the Museum of Natural History along with her skeleton. Both her brain and genitalia were on display in the Musée de l’Homme (Museum of Man) until 1972.

### **The Intersection of Scientific Racism and Colonialism**

European expansionism and colonial conquest resulted in the construction of “body” based on the notion of race. These colonisers narrated stories about Africans possessing inferior faculties, unintelligent, animal-like, without a soul, pagan, savage, and uncivilized. The nineteenth-century naturalists took it upon themselves to provide scientific proof for why Non-white people were inferior and animalistic, making Europeans the superior race by default. Governments used this pseudoscience at the time to justify the slave trade, colonialism, and violence against Black people. According to this White supremacist logic, it is their ‘duty’ to guide the obviously inferior and animalistic indigenous people of the colonies. Baartman, tragically, became a victim of this dehumanizing colonial logic. Her body was objectified and dissected by scientists, who sought to categorize and classify her based on racial stereotypes and pseudoscientific theories. For them, her body represented a human trophy of colonial expansion and conquest.

Cuvier and his fellow Naturalists used Sara’s body as evidence of Black people as an abnormal or nonhuman group somewhere between an ape and a human. If her sexual parts could be shown to be inherently different, this would be a sufficient sign that black people were a separate and lower race. He even compared her genitalia to that of an orangutan (a higher ape). During the autopsy, Cuvier was not at all interested in the cause of her death and only wanted to have an opportunity to take a closer look at her body and to reinforce white supremacist theories. Cuvier measured her body parts, going as far as making a plaster cast out of her body, and concluded that she was the “missing link” between animals and humans.

Curvier was drawn to Baartman’s physique due to her elongated labia minora, which he described as an “apron.” He perceived it as unusually phallic, contrasting sharply with her distinctly feminine hips

and breasts. This combination of distinctly feminine features with those Curvier saw as ambiguously masculine rendered Baartman a subject of intrigue, apprehension, and fascination. Further, he posited Baartman as a case to argue that, in contrast to white women, African women's reproductive anatomy was overly developed, suggesting this led to heightened sexual promiscuity. Her body was used to portray the scientific-racist theories based on Linnaeus' Taxonomy, which was hierarchical. Europeans were at the top, and Africans were at the bottom. Linnaeus proposed that there was a subspecies called homo monstrous (not completely human), and Hottentots were classified under this subspecies because their bodies induced anxiety in others.

Using their findings, the naturalists questioned the humanity of Black people Baartman's racial identity contributed to her being labeled as unconventional, but it was also her breasts and buttocks, which were considered excessively large by European norms, that emphasized this perception. The size of Baartman's buttocks was interpreted as reflecting the size of her clitoris and supposedly indicated an increased sexual desire. Her body was categorized as grotesque, lascivious, and obscene. She was mocked, shamed, eroticised, and fetishized for her body. Described as "the most correct and perfect specimen of her race." Bartman became the embodiment of radicalized black sexuality and deviance. She was promoted as a spectacle and scientific curiosity catering to the notion of her people as other and exotic. Naturalists sought scientific validation for gendered racism. Sara was displayed as a freak for the perverted and lustful eyes of the white men who reduced her body to a mere object for his gazing. Her black body was seen as the exact opposite of that of a white European woman. According to them, non-European women, particularly African women, became the embodiments of perverse and uncontrollable sexuality, which made them primitive in comparison with civilized European women. The white woman was seen as chaste, beautiful, and submissive as opposed to a black woman's deviant and animalistic sexuality. In order to validate White women's sexual purity, Black women's sexuality was seen as racially inferior and deviant.

This scientific validation of non-European women's dangerous sexuality came at a time when the promiscuity of white European men in the colonies was scrutinised, which in turn insulted any allegations of immorality. European males could establish the "inherent superiority" of their racial intelligence, simultaneously contributing to the elevation of white women just by showing how different black females were. By proving the otherness of Bartman and her people, Cuvier was able to reassert the white European male's dominance and justify the colonial mindset. Sarah Baartman was displayed as not human but as a quasi-human artifact. Her sexual parts, her genitalia, and her buttocks serve as the central image for black women throughout the nineteenth century. In the 19th century, the genitalia of the Hottentot were perceived as parallel to the diseased genitalia of the prostitute.

### **Stereotypes around Black women's bodies**

Black individuals were viewed as lacking power and were reduced to mere physicality, embodying both racial identity and perceived attractiveness despite being considered unappealing. The black female form was emblematic of the ultimate enslaved individual, and dominating it symbolized victory for the white colonial ruler. Beauty standards in Europe were aligned with the white female form, while blackness was equated with a lack of beauty. Control over both women and indigenous peoples was deemed necessary by European men, particularly over black women, who were stereotyped as more "primitive" and sexually uninhibited. They used stereotypes surrounding Black women's bodies that are deeply rooted in centuries of systemic racism, colonialism, and white supremacy to control them.

The Jezebel stereotype also started during the era of slavery in the US, where black women were shown as promiscuous, hypersexual, and overtly seductive. This stereotype where black women are depicted as sexual deviants is the main narrative behind Black Venus (Sara Baartman), which is the opposite of white Victorian womanhood. Here, the word Venus was used as an oxymoron and racist

ridicule because how can a dark-skinned African woman ever be a Venus? They were shown as unable to control their urges, reinforcing the harmful idea of them being inferior beings and dehumanizing them. Calling black women deviant with dangerous sexuality gave the European colonists the rationale for raping the slaves and prostituting them. Their bodies were described as available for sexual access and used to normalize sexual violence against Black women. European men projected all sorts of forbidden sexual desires and fears on them. This hypersexualisation had lasting implications on black women's identity beyond slavery. Literature and media representation portrayed them in a way that questioned their moral character. This jezebel stereotype became a tool for sexual exploitation and discrimination against black women. Because black women were hypersexual, sexual assault towards them is misrepresented as consensual sex.

The Mammy stereotype was prevalent because of the history of slavery in the United States. They used this stereotype to justify and perpetuate the institution of slavery. Mammy is described as a black woman who is a loyal, submissive, nurturing servant to white families. She is overweight, dark-skinned, and is content with being subordinate to her white family. This stereotype reinforced slavery and racism and justified oppression created by white Southerners. They used this to redeem the relationship between black women and white men within slavery during the antebellum. Mammy was portrayed deliberately as dark-skinned, obese, and old or middle-aged in a society that deemed all of the above features as ugly and unattractive.

This was a conscious attempt to desexualize black women so that a white man would never choose her over a white woman. It also showed that black women could only fit to be domestic servants. The mammy stereotype became a rationalisation for economic discrimination against black women. This was especially true during the Jim Crow era in the 1960s in the US, where black women were completely restricted to mainly house servants and other menial and low paying jobs. The literary depictions of the mammy stereotype became really popular several decades after slavery in nostalgic memoirs of the Old South written between 1906 and 1912. The character of Aunt Chloe from Uncle Tom's Cabin is a perfect example of the Mammy stereotype, where she is depicted as projective and nurturing towards her white family but not so much towards her own children. She is a self-sacrificing, asexual, good-humored, loyal servant. Another example of such a depiction of this stereotype is from the film *Gone with the Wind*. The United States was so desperate to be absolved of the crimes of slavery that such a maternal, asexual, ever-loyal, and black servant had to be invented.

The Sapphire stereotype became popular during the 1800s and mid-1900s, which portrayed black women as sassy, domineering, emasculating, loud, and angry. This trope depicted African American women as aggressive, loud, and angry and in direct violation of social norms. It's essential to recognize and challenge these stereotypes as part of a broader effort to dismantle systemic racism and address the historical injustices that have disproportionately affected Black individuals, particularly Black women. Understanding and confronting these stereotypes is crucial for fostering a more inclusive and equitable society.

### **Reclaiming of Black Women's Identity and Agency**

In 2002, nearly 200 years later, Sara Baartman's remains were brought home to South Africa and buried. Baartman's legacy has been used as a source of empowerment for black women in today's world. Black women in the early twentieth century sought to counter the objectification, stereotypes, and hypersexualisation of their bodies by producing an ideal image of a black woman with Victorian ideals of chastity and purity. But this, in turn, created a self-imposed sexual repression among them and created a sort of sexual invisibility.

But newer generations are trying to move away from repressing their sexuality, rather encouraging Black women to embrace their bodies and sexual autonomy. Elizabeth Alexander, in her

poetry collection, 'The Hottentot Venus,' gives Baartman a new voice and the respect she deserves. Alexander's Baartman completely debunks her sexual deviancy but instead is sexually autonomous. Many other contemporary writers and artists like Alexander are making active efforts to rewrite the narrative around Black women and their bodies.

Throughout history, Black women have been subjected to relentless scrutiny, objectification, and oppression. Their humanity was reduced to mere stereotypes and caricatures that still impact societal attitudes that surround them. Baartman's life story serves as a stark reminder of dehumanising impact of racism, sexism, and colonialism. And how black women's bodies have been othered, commodified, and sexually exploited to serve the curiosity and entertainment of the 'superior race.' Baartman's legacy is a reminder of the enduring impact of historical trauma and systemic oppression. It also functions as a catalyst for the ways in which we as a society can be prompted to interrogate the ways in which our society continues to perpetuate harmful stereotypes and marginalize black women based on their bodies. Body performance among black women is not just a story of struggle and survival but one of triumph and transformation, a true testament to the power of resilience, resistance, and the enduring spirit of black womanhood.

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