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Racism, Misogyny and Homophobia in Patriarchal White Supremacist *Norbit*

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Abstract

Taking into account the huge impact of Hollywood in popular culture, this paper analyzes the different mechanisms that the movie *Norbit* employs to perpetuate stereotyped discourses that aligned themselves to a white supremacist ideology. Focusing on the character Rasputia (her body, language and psique), the author compares the similarities between *Norbit* and the Sapphire stereotype. Issues of gender, class, economy and education come to the surface when taking a critical approach to an object of study that shields itself in the “comedy” genre to reproduce discriminatory discourses and representations.

1. Introduction

One of the issues most often debated in relation to Hollywood productions is its racist tradition and its subsequent legacy in present-day cinema. Thus, the following essay attempts to bring into discussion the 2007 film *Norbit* starred by Eddie Murphy, which immensely succeeded at the box office, though its poor critical reception.

In this work I argue that the perpetuation of a patriarchal white supremacist ideology in the movie is accomplished through the othering of Rasputia, an example of the Sapphire stereotype that, by targeting a white audience, fails to mirror black womanhood and problematizes African American identification with the character. Murphy's cross-dressing as an overweight black female diminishes the protagonist and turns her into an object of ridicule. Besides, Rasputia is depicted as an evil, vulgar, domineering and emasculated woman who overtly bullies Norbit, her husband. This is why the audience is prevented from any sympathy towards her fate and encouraged to laugh at her misfortune and plus size.

The ensuing pages analyze the character as a white portrayal of blackness inscribed in a tradition of African American stigmatization. Hence, the first section of the essay dwells on the Sapphire stereotype and examines its intersectional effects in terms of race, gender, class and sexuality. Through these elements Rasputia emerges as a caricature-like figure that suits the

expectations of a white public. The film's discriminatory logic is analyzed by means of the different English varieties chosen by the characters and the intentions behind Murphy's drag performance.

2. The Sapphire in *Rasputia*

The film *Norbit* revolves around its predominant figure *Rasputia*, an overweight, irascible and aggressive black female who keeps *Norbit*, her husband, under her yoke. This is why she is to be understood as an example of the Sapphire stereotype.

The origin of the Sapphire is to be traced back to the 1940s and 1950s radio and television show *Amos 'n' Andy* (West 296). The Sapphire stereotype is named after one of the protagonists of the sitcom, Sapphire Stevens. The Sapphire image consists of a black woman who is sassy, hostile, ill-tempered and coarse. Nevertheless, "because of her intense expressiveness and hands-on-hip, finger-pointing style, Sapphire is viewed as comedic and is never taken seriously" (Jewell 45). Moreover, she is always pictured next to an African American male.

Rasputia's first apparition in the movie is already revealing. *Norbit* is being bullied by two older boys who batter him on the playground, and the shadow of *Rasputia* enters the scene. Later on, the spectatorship is faced with her sturdy body, which is exaggerated through a low-angle shooting. The character presents an enraged expression and proceeds to rescue her future husband by striking the bullies. Besides, she also utters that the intention behind her action was "to protect you" (5:44) and, once *Norbit* has stated that he does not have a girlfriend, she tells him "well, you do now. Get your ass up and hold my hand" (5:52). The scene establishes the couple dynamics by portraying her as dominant and impudent, and by relegating him to a subordinate position. The expectations of prototypical gender performance are already reversed from the very beginning and her threatening and unmannerly disposition is directed against *Norbit*.

A further derogatory situation takes place after *Norbit* has caught *Rasputia* in bed with her dance coach. She denies what appears to be obvious and furiously chases *Norbit* who tries to escape. When he falls to the ground and she is out of breath, she vociferates the following:

That's what your stupid black ass get! I hope you broke your ass! Since you feel like running, *Norbit*, why don't you run your ass down to the

Rib Shak and get me a short stack of ribs? Extra hot sauce. All this setting you straight done got me famished. (24:05)

These statements are instances of Rasputia's cantankerousness and lack of empathy. Although it is the husband who feels betrayed and aggrieved, she answers with anger and expects Norbit to behave in the usual compliant manner, regardless of his emotions. The African American woman in the film is hence vilified, which legitimizes its caricature and the laughter effect, at her expense, intended on the audience. Rasputia becomes the Other through a process of demonization that starts from her early violent apparition against the bullies, and extends to her marital infidelity and unrestrained jealousy.

Rasputia's oversimplistic characterization reduces her to the Sapphire stereotype, which is to be interpreted as part of a historically ingrained tradition of African American stigmatization. Norbit's depiction goes along with such practice, as he is a key figure for his wife's despotism. Both protagonists are examples of a US deep-seated politically regressive ideology that reinforces a white supremacist system. As Ingrid Banks argues,

Yet stereotypes of African American Women have said less about the actual identities of black women but a great deal more about how whites imagine black women. Predicated on both racist and sexist beliefs that assume the cultural inferiority of blacks and the cultural superiority of whites, stereotypes of African American women have actually been constructed to justify the social, political, and economic subjugation of black women. (68)

Norbit subscribes to a well-established ideology of White Supremacy under the pretext of comedy, which leads to the trivialization of power asymmetries. In Bank's words, "as a result, the structural inequalities that black women face in the broader society are ultimately aired on the big screen for entertainment value" (68).

Although "diversity has been articulated as a part of the liberal solution to racism" (Bonilla-Silva et al. 57), the proliferation of African American characters does not guarantee racial equality. In *Norbit* black figures are ridiculed, which stabilizes the notion of colorblind racism given that the film neglects "to recognize race as a social reality" (Bonilla-Silva et al. 57). All in all, in Post-Racial America black stigmatization continues to be in vogue in mainstream productions and characters such as Rasputia are given central roles as if their performances were to be the result of granting African American population the same opportunities that white privilege entails.

3. Intersectionality of Race, Gender, Sexuality and Class

3.1. Language as a Marker of Social Class

The African American characters in the movie can be classified according to the variety of English they use, which is not an innocent choice. Whereas Rasputia, her brothers, her dance trainer and the so-called pimps speak African American Vernacular, Norbit, Kate and Cuba, Kate's fiancée, opt for a Standard variety.

African American Vernacular is a stigmatized form of speech in terms of race and class. As Alice Filmer states,

The marginalization and stigma attached to AAVE represent the audibly perceptible linguistic and cultural barrier that separates speakers of this particular non-standard variety of the language from dominant sectors of US society. Speakers of AAVE face not only regional (southern) and social class (lower SES) discrimination, but racial prejudice as well. [...] Within mainstream American society – in conservative and liberal sectors alike – a prevailing belief holds that speakers of AAVE are somehow deficient intellectually, culturally, and socially as evidenced by their use of language. (258)

In *Norbit* the speakers of African American Vernacular are vilified, considered amoral and portrayed as mentally inferior. Language is a very powerful tool that conditions the audience in an apparently subtle and inadvertent way and reinforces the binary opposition of good versus evil. While AAVE is used to establish a distance between Rasputia and the public, the Standard variety chosen by Kate and her fiancée appeals to a white spectatorship and attempts to make identification possible with “dominant sectors of US society” (Filmer 258) who share the same form of speech. By contrast, Rasputia as well as her family are othered and made objects of ridicule through their use of a non-prestigious variety.

Furthermore, it is worth noting the derogative metaphors used against Rasputia throughout the movie. At her wedding, Hangten Wong, the owner of the orphanage where the protagonists grew up, addresses Norbit with the words, “when you was a little boy, you say “one day I find the girl of my dreams” and then you marry a gorilla” (11:35). The character even concludes his talk with the sentence “so I say to everyone here, and to Norbit, I wish you much happiness and peace and love, and lots of bananas for your new gorilla” (13:35). The protagonist

is defined as a primate due to her skin color and corpulence, which is understood as unfeminine. The ideology behind the statement is that black womanhood equates to being non-human. However, the remark is celebrated among the wedding guests and accepted under the cover of humor.

The dog also offers a solution to deal with Rasputia, “kill the bitch. [...] Rub her out. Take her down. Ice the bitch. [...] She took my legs, Norbit” (1:12:27). These words, however, depict the African American female character as the cause of evil and declare the need to put an end to it by annihilation. The end of the movie displays how Rasputia and her family move to Mexico, where they lead a pseudo-criminal life and are able to become their ‘true inner selves’. Hence, the dog shows a premonitory function and concurs with the ultimate message of the film: the undesirability of imagined blackness in American soil.

3.2 The Concealed Ideology in Murphy’s Cross-dressing

Rasputia’s morbid obesity and Murphy’s cross-dressing are strategic elements that are constantly lampooned. Under the pretext of equality before the law and queer presence, the movie derides Rasputia’s drag performances, which go hand in hand with African American representation. Besides, “these female characters are also reminiscent of the nineteenth-century minstrel theater in which white men (and later black men) not only wore blackface, but also cross-dressed as women” (Mask 161). Black womanhood and queerness are made the central objects of ridicule. This is why drag cannot be regarded as subversive in the film given that *Norbit* stabilizes a white heterosexist ideology by means of stigmatization and the othering of Rasputia.

The critical potential of “drag” centrally concerns a critique of a prevailing truth-regime of “sex”, one that I take to be pervasively heterosexist: the distinction between the “inside” truth of femininity, considered as psychic disposition or ego-core, and the “outside” truth, considered as appearance or presentation, produces a contradictory formation of gender in which no fixed “truth” can be established. (Butler 234)

Cross-dressing may illustrate the construction and contingency of gender performances for no natural or essential gender identities are taken for granted. Thus, performing drag is as valid and original as ‘becoming a woman’. Nevertheless, *Norbit* exploits the caricature of Rasputia instead of the latent disruption characteristic of the drag. In Mia Mask’s words,

The characters are literally abject because they are not male or female, neither alive nor fully human but rather latex-laden transgender incarnations of women impersonated by men. The characters are neither subject nor object, but rather something in between: the fictional, transgendered creations of the film's narration and their impersonating actors. (160)

Judith Butler also argues that "The heterosexual logic that requires that identification and desire be mutually exclusive is one of the most reductive of heterosexism's psychological instruments: if one identifies as a given gender, one must desire a different gender" (239). Although the figure of the drag might defy the heterosexual matrix given that the subject and the object of desire share the same sex, *Norbit* does not concur with such resistance for the film puts an end to Rasputia as she emigrates from the United States. The drag is, thus, relegated to ridicule, and her annihilation reinforces the heterosexual paradigm. However, as tragic as Rasputia's fate might be, the character evokes the constraints of the heterosexual logic by resisting gender binarisms. The lack of one-to-one correspondence between sex and gender identification questions the heterosexual privilege by offering an alternative. As Butler puts it,

Drag thus allegorizes heterosexual melancholy, the melancholy by which a masculine gender is formed from the refusal to grieve the masculine as a possibility of love; a feminine gender is formed (taken on, assumed) through the incorporative fantasy by which the feminine is excluded as a possible object of love, an exclusion never grieved, but "preserved" through the heightening of feminine identification itself. (235)

It is worth mentioning that the resolution of the movie also problematizes the question of homosexuality because "the anxiety over a possible homosexual consequence is both produced and deflected within the narrative trajectory" (Butler 126). The vilification of Rasputia and her final persecution show a homophobic moment before the natural order is restored by the coming together of Norbit and Kate. The gay romance is prevented and the ending of the comedy sticks to the common heterosexual couple.

Homophobia is, nevertheless, not the only discriminatory practice shown throughout the footage given that sexism plays a very significant role as well. Without reducing the analysis of male-to-female cross-dressing to rooting all homosexual activities in misogyny (Butler 127), the instance of the drag in *Norbit* degrades and mocks black womanhood. Once Murphy has embodied an African American female, she becomes a mere reproduction of the long-lasting Sapphire stereotype. The character is denied nuances and particularities that might project a

realistic image of African American experiences and reiterates the features of the Angry Black Woman. Mask's inquiry on Norbit points out that

As politically regressive and sexist as they often are, fat-suit movies also ventriloquize a feminist sensibility. The fat-suited comedian manipulates the tenor of his voice to sound female and to project a woman's worldview. They also deploy the criticality or radicality of unruly, full-figured female subjects who critique the center from the margin; who menace the dominant discourse; who have an alternative sensibility. Manipulation of the voice becomes part of the gender performance and the way comedians register black feminine dissent and rebellion. (162)

Part of Murphy's gender performance is based on obesity and addresses "the excesses of overindulgent, postindustrial sedentary lifestyles and cultural habits" (Mask 157) given that overweight is a major public health issue in the United States. Furthermore,

Historically, African Americans have resisted dominant Euro-American body and beauty standards and the concomitant "tyranny of thinness," resulting in a fuller and healthier body image. Over the past three decades, however, as the national trend has shifted, African Americans (and black women in particular) have developed the highest rates of obesity compared to other groups in the United States. (Mask 155)

Hence, Murphy incorporates obesity into the enduring stigmatization of African American women. Along the film there are instances in which overweight is lampooned by means of exaggeration. By the first twenty minutes, Rasputia has already faced problems in entering the car given that her hyperbolic breasts collide several times against the horn. The laughter effect reaches its climax when Norbit's wife blames him; "How many times I got to tell you, when you drive my car, don't adjust my seat! [...] No, you moved it. I can tell 'cause look, when I inhale, my titty make the horn honk. Listen." (15:33).

Nevertheless, through her corpulence, Rasputia defies contemporary beauty paradigms and reasserts herself in opposition to Kate. For instance, Norbit's wife reproaches Kate the following,

I'm just trying to say you too damn skinny. Look at you. See, most men like a woman that got a little... Or a little... You ain't got nothing. You just skin and bones [...] I feel sorry for you. [...] I'm thinking about going on a little diet or something so I can get all emaciated-looking like you, then he'll [Norbit] think I look disgusting, and I can get a rest or some sleep for a little while. (48:46)

This is one of the scenes which aims at the complicity of the audience who is supposed to laugh at the deployment of an alternative worldview that challenges the white hegemonic expectations of class, gender and physical appearance or, in other words, the norm. Nevertheless, such a characterization is meant to set Murphy up as a renowned movie star. As Mask states,

But the performed trans-sex transvestism is not effective within or outside the diegesis. The transgender gestures, behaviors and secondary sex characteristics are not maintained throughout the film, but are designed to remind audiences of the particularity of Eddie Murphy's idiolect: his set of performance traits and techniques, his variety of language manifested by patterns of words, grammar, phrases, idioms or pronunciations unique to Murphy's 40-year comedic repertoire. (170)

The character of Rasputia attempts to exhibit the actor's trajectory. This is why *Norbit* becomes a star vehicle that remains indifferent to all the negative associations that might be attributed to womanhood, "fatness, blackness, and working-class identity" (Mask 170).

4. Conclusions

The analysis of *Norbit* concludes that the ideology portrayed in the film is racist, misogynist and homophobic on the grounds of the treatment to which Rasputia is exposed. The character embodies the pejorative Sapphire stereotype and inscribes itself in the tradition of African American stigmatization. Rasputia's vilification and amorality trigger the lack of sympathy towards her fate and legitimize the movie's laughter effect at her expense.

The Sapphire in *Norbit* is exhibited through Murphy's cross-dressing, which works as a star vehicle. Thus, the concept of drag is ridiculed and denied of its immanent disruption. The ideologically charged ending discards Rasputia, and her family by extension, so that the annihilation of the gender ambivalence stabilizes the heterosexual matrix. The dénouement also refuses a potential homosexual outcome by restoring the established order of a conventional couple, Norbit and Kate. Moreover, the movie puts an end to villainous blackness by sending Rasputia's family, who make use of the African American Vernacular variety, away from domestic soil. All these practices are justified under the pretext of humor and entertainment and show complete indifference to the controversial issues of race, gender, sexuality and class. Therefore, heterosexual white males remain the unmarked norm throughout the footage, which

points to the reinforcement of a white supremacist status quo; the use of humor in the movie is not subversive but conforms to very conservative ideologies instead.

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