Madam and Eve: A caricature of black women's subjectivity?

Against the silence on black women and their subjectivity in dominant culture, GAIL SMITH critically reviews the cartoon MADAM AND EVE. As a leading icon of black femininity in South Africa, Eve, the sassy maid, is no more than a stereotype of oppressed black womanhood, she argues.

Jacqueline Bobo, following British cultural critic Stuart Hall, asserts:

The way a group of people is represented can play a determining role in how these people are treated socially and politically. This means that the process of representation is a politically charged act. That being the case, the process of criticism has ramifications as well. In black culture, Hall states, once a person enters the politics of criticisms, that person leaves the age of critical innocence (Bobo, 1992:66).

My interest in cultural criticism comes from a discourse analysis of press reporting on Winnie Mandela. In attempting to understand the politics of race and representation, I left the age of critical innocence. In leaving the age of critical innocence you become acutely aware of subject positioning and who we laugh at and why. My ‘reading’ of South African popular culture is coloured by the ways in which black bodies have moved into the dominant media.

Madam and Eve is one instance where black bodies play a key role. Their presence sustains the narrative and the satire. And Eve (as a character and a stereotype) is one of the most well-known black women in South Africa, after Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, Dr Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, Felicia Mabuza-Suttle, and Jacquie Mofokeng. Eve has become a South African icon alongside her employer Madam. And like Bobo and Hall, I believe that this is a process that is politically charged and yet goes largely unchallenged. Instead, the cartoon is sold and syndicated internationally. It sells everything from cell phones to advertising space on the SABC, and will apparently be turned into a soap opera soon. One of the most obvious examples of the commodification of poor black womanhood, slips seamlessly into the silence on black women and their subjectivity in dominant culture. I am a black woman and I know how quickly white people who treat me like a stereotype lead me into a sense of humour failure.

Who are the powerful black women icons in South African popular culture? Where are those who can and do theorise their own experience as self-defining and black subjects? What choices are available to black women to hold-up as their own? Forgive me for being the spectre at the ‘Simunye’ feast, but I insist that apartheid did not just up and leave for calmer climes. I believe it still exists. So yes, race is still an issue for me, and always will be. Unlike Ms Madikizela-Mandela, Dr Zuma, Ms Mabuza-

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Suttle and Ms Mofokeng, Eve really is the only black woman in Eden who can’t speak back. Her fate is to be forever manipulated by the gods of Rapid Phase, who will speak for her. A central argument of this in brief is that Madam and Eve, under the guise of political satire, flaunts what Desire Lewis calls ‘interpretive mastery’ (Lewis, 1993) by the clever insertion of a black woman into a narrative that is produced by – and financially beneficial to – S Frances, H Dugmore and Rico, the three white men who created her.

Political satire

When I first heard about Madam and Eve I was excited because I had hoped it was an attempt to take discourse around the intersection of class, race and gender into the dominant media. Eve’s presence as a black woman in a political satire lit a spark of hope inside of me. But instead Eve and other black characters in the cartoon are there to fulfill a conservative agenda. They do not challenge white perceptions of blackness that are deeply entrenched after decades of legalised racism in South Africa.

Eve’s character is doomed to betray her initial promise as a potentially radical or transgressive portrayal of black South African femininity. As the maid stereotype, Eve is presented as evidence of ‘change’ in South Africa. Yet at the same time the Maid–Madam power dynamic ensures that she cannot become too threatening. The ‘fresh aspect’ of the cartoon is that she talks back, and is not a victim, but the character is tightly controlled and remains essentially unthreatening. Like her more vocal counterparts in the dominant media, Eve does not challenge too much. Her high visibility as a representative of our underclass does not challenge, but appears to legitimate affirmiative action hysteria: petulant white South Africans who don’t want to let go of their fears, instilled in them through apartheid, but who don’t want to engage with white supremacy in any meaningful way; who insist that class difference is the same as race difference. This is the reality of my new South Africa. And Eve’s character rarely comes close to challenging it.

Eve and her relationship to Madam brings a new South African stereotype to the public discourse. But domestic workers and the maid/madam relationship is merely a vehicle and Eve’s presence is not an attempt to introduce the devaluation of black womanhood, the exploitation of domestic workers, the feminisation of domestic work, or deal with black womanhood in any real way. The cartoon constructs black characters using what Hall (1995) calls the ‘grammar of race’. Black characters are either long-serving, much loved ‘maids’ or arrogant and uppity black bitches. They are either menacing hijackers, hapless affirmative action candidates or yuppie sangomas – all the objects of ridicule. Madam and Eve relies on black stereotypes that do not challenge white supremacy. It legitimates white stereotypification of black experience. Eve is presented as a ‘sassy black woman’ when the reality of being black and woman means that ‘sass’ comes at a price, and for domestic workers that price could very well be your job. And more importantly, how many black women with ‘sass’ exist in South African popular culture?

Eurocentric norms

There are rigid norms and stereotypes to conform to if you want to make it in the South African imagination as a black woman. Witness the careful mutation of Miss Gauteng, Peggy Sue Khumalo who dazzled me every time she got on the Number 21 bus from Yeoville: a six-foot black diva, with big shoes, big Afro and big attitude. And clever to boot! I ran into the reigning Miss Gauteng at the Women’s Day...
40th commemoration at the Union Buildings, in Pretoria. Gone was the ‘look’ that grabbed my attention, that made me cheer. To make it as a black beauty queen in South Africa, she had to acquire a Toni Braxton weave and perfect the ‘waiting to exhale’ look down to a tee. Her background as the daughter of a poor domestic worker gives suitable credibility to her new status, and is evidence of how far she has come. (This is not to trash PS Khumalo as I respect her right to play with her look.) But let’s face it white South Africa is just not ready for a six-foot black woman with big hair, passing herself off as a beauty queen. Conforming to a racially defined stereotype is rewarding in many situations. And making it in the beauty industry business means conforming to a particular eurocentric aesthetic.

Eve as a ‘maid’ conjures up another stereotype that has come to represent, both internationally and in the minds of most South Africans, black female sexuality. In South Africa, it does not matter if you have no black friends with whom to interact as equals, you are guaranteed to have some kind (usually quite an intimate) relationship with a poor black woman in your service. Eve is a stereotypical representation of black South African womanhood that is gaining immense currency. However, stereotypes undermine both the groups they refer to and the individuals they are projected onto. And to borrow from hooks:

*Stereotypes, however inaccurate, are one form of representation. Like fictions, they are created to serve as substitutions...They are not to tell it like it is, but to invite and encourage pretence. They are a fantasy, a projection onto the Other that makes them less threatening (hooks, 1992:26).

Eve as a stereotype simply echoes a larger new South African or post-apartheid discourse. She brings the necessary blackness to a narrative that argues the idea that with the ‘birth’ of a new democracy in South Africa, it is no longer necessary to be passionate about oppression and domination. The stereotype of the liberated maid is projected uncritically onto a society in which racial oppression is still a reality. *Madam and Eve* is presented as evidence of how far we have come from a society where notions of white supremacy turned racial stereotyping into law and entrenched systemic oppression based on skin colour. Yet it never engages the politics of race, women and housework. It not only reflects racial stereotypes, but it pits two women against each other. Men are noticeably absent in the cartoon; white men in particular. It does not challenge the politics of housework, or the ways in which women’s labour is undervalued. And Eve can call herself a ‘domestic maintenance engineer’ until the cows come home.

**Domestic labour undervalued**

The reality of domestic work in South Africa is that until poor black women no longer do the work it will remain unskilled labour. If maids went on strike and engaged on nationwide mass action, would the Rand drop? *Madam and Eve* perpetuates the
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A terse exchange followed:

‘Grace that’s a lovely diamond bracelet. Can I have it back, please?’ Sulky eyes met mine.
‘But I like it.’
‘Yes Grace, I know, but it’s mine.’
‘Later’, madam saucily tossed over her shoulder.
‘Anyway, you told me to look nice.’
(Tina Turner’s ) assistants... jostled us out of the way, and we three humble African girls stood back in naked envy as Aladín’s cave of glittering goodies was unpacked.

‘I’m leaving’, she drawled. ‘I’m tired now. I won’t be coming in tomorrow. I’m going to a funeral in the Transkei. Can you lend me some money?’

And there, for the love of God, goes Grace, Goodbye Madams, both of you.

De Waal’s narrative is constructed around the humour of two uppity black women: Tina Turner and Grace (no surname given). The humour of the piece relies on the stereotype of the black female overreacher who aspires to ‘madam status’. Turner and Grace provide the crucial ‘race’ factor without which the piece would not be funny. De Waal constructs herself as a victim to the whims of two black women: the rich black superstar and the surly maid.

Banished to the ironing board

I wonder if Grace would have featured had De Waal been asked to cater for a white superstar? Unlike de Waal’s Grace, Gwen Anderson’s (madam in Madam and Eve) Eve is a lot more manageable, she can always be banished to the ironing board. And she is constantly reminded of the limits of her power, both by Madam and by her three white male creators. Witness the cover to a collection of Madam and Eve, called All Aboard for the Gravy Train, where Eve and Mother Anderson are aboard a locomotive that is overflowing with money. Silhouetted revellers, ostensibly our greedy, corrupt and inept...
new Government, are seen in the carriages. Turn over the book and witness Eve with her broom in hand looking resigned to the fact that she will be responsible for clearing the debris of the party. *Madam and Eve* has a resonance for a broad cross-section of South Africa because you don’t have to be a white woman to have a maid. Almost every permutation of class, race and gender in this country employs domestic workers. *Madam and Eve* has made it into the international magazines like *The New Yorker*, etc because it ‘works’ white South African guilt. But it’s popular because ‘maid guilt’ has immense cross-over appeal.

Madam’s horror at the relationship between her son Eric and the black Lizeka is familiar. It reflects another bit of South African commonality: the unsuitability of black women as partners for white males.

**Apartheid and black sexuality**

Eric’s choice raises the spectre of diluted blood lines, of black grandchildren. Under apartheid, children were classified according to their father’s race, but if the mother is black, the child is black. Madam’s disapproval contrasted with Eve’s amused acceptance plays on another good old white South African misconception: that whites stand to lose the most through interracial relationships. That in marrying white, you are marrying up, no matter how sorry your partner is. What is Eve’s relationship with white men? Eve’s sexuality is rarely featured and her relationship with Sol (the man in her life) is rather ambiguous; she relates more like a sister than a lover. It is in her sexual relations with white men where her (white male) creators call into
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play two nasty apartheid stereotypes of black female sexuality.

She is associated with voracious sexuality and objectified as a bit of black pussy to satisfy Mick Jagger’s bad white boy appetite for ‘brown sugar’. She is merely fulfilling the expectation that black women are sexually accessible and indiscriminate.

With the onslaught of commodified blackness, the need for anti-racism is greater than ever before. We need to look beyond tokenism and critically engage with the politics of race and representation. Eve has to teach Madam the words to the anthem, a dominant theme in the cartoon. In this new South Africa blacks are expected to have a ‘natural awareness’ of the ways in which apartheid oppressed us. But a parallel ‘natural awareness’ in whites of how they were (and continue to be) privileged by apartheid is not expected.

Blacks are expected to ‘understand the politics of oppression’ while whites are allowed the privilege of ignorance. The burden of responsibility for the education of white people falls onto black people. We are not allowed the luxury of hiding behind that familiar excuse: ‘I was brought up that way’. Audre Lorde argues that by shifting this burden of education onto black people, whites are allowed to abnegate responsibility for racial oppression:

It is the responsibility of the oppressed to teach the oppressors their mistakes...

Black and Third World people are expected to educate white people as to our humanity. Women are expected to educate men. Lesbians and gay men are expected to educate the hetero-sexual world. The oppressors maintain their position and evade responsibility for their actions (Lorde, 1994:36).

Part of this ‘teach me’ burden is the expectation that blacks will let whites off the hook when they betray signs of white supremacy. That we will laugh it off.

Political resistance

I am not arguing that white men (or black men or white women) don’t have the right to create black characters, rather I’m intervening in a monologue which has largely excluded black women’s voices as critics. Making race/gender oppression marketable and selling it as humour cannot be allowed to pass as evidence of real change. In trying to engage with the politics of representation, and with Eve as an example of white objectification – a character created by whites for whites in which blacks enter merely to validate dominant perceptions of the ‘native’ and threatening other – I am often rebuked and scolded for being ‘too serious’ or ‘obsessed with race’ or merely lacking in humour. My need to define myself as a critical subject goes unacknowledged. The construction of black...
female subjectivity as an act of political resistance has not been raised in the public discussions on *Madam and Eve*. Black women who talk back to white male dominance are unfamiliar in South African popular culture. We are also unfamiliar as critics and our ‘readings’ of white culture are still largely ignored. Lewis (1993) describes the political backdrop to the politics of who is represented by whom and the unspoken within the politics of popular culture and asserts that whites have assumed the right to interpret black experience in South Africa. While blacks may express themselves, feel and respond, whites observe, explain and strengthen their normativeness. The distinction between expression, on the one hand, and interpretation, on the other, has helped to create and standardise racist oppositions. Blacks may express themselves but may not display self-interpretive control (Lewis: 1993).

An essential part of asserting our rights to be black and female and a self-defining subject, is that we must confront the apartheid ideology that still lurks in the imagination of white South Africa, and which stands in the way of our being represented in all our diversity. We will not automatically be given spaces in which to create black female subjects who are unconstrained by racism. We must make these spaces and maybe in so doing we too will have the choice of laughing at ourselves in all our multiplicity of identities.

This *in brief* is not advocating that only black women can represent black women. It is an attempt to understand the cartoon’s characters through press reviews (Frances et al, 1996) – as ‘these two women who have captured a new niche in popular culture’ (*The New York Times*) and to challenge the idea that *Madam and Eve* (is) proof that South Africans have learnt to laugh at themselves (*Newsweek*). I dispute the notion that the maid/madam power dynamic as represented by three white middle class men is ‘hilariously ironic: (and) accurately reflects the changes in modern South African society’ (*The Big Issue, London*).

The Guardian’s assertion that *Madam and Eve* is the ‘most painless way of understanding South African politics’ comes closest to reflecting my view of the cartoon. It is painless because it does not force white South Africans to challenge their white supremacist reading of black female subjectivity. And it is popular because the maid/madam power dynamic is still relegated to the ‘private domain’. Like many other power relations that directly impact on women’s lives, it is still excluded from the ‘public discourse’.

**REFERENCES:**


**FOOTNOTES**

1. ‘Simunye’ is the SABC slogan to build a non-racial ethos of togetherness.

2. Rapid Phase is the company that produces and markets *Madam and Eve*.

3. The press reviews carried in *Madam and Eve* – *All Aboard for the Gravy Train* (Frances et al 1995) are not dated.

**Gail Smith is an unemployable feminist, currently working as a temp to pay her bills**