

**THE MODERN REPRESENTATION OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN  
WOMAN BASED ON THE CHARACTER OF OLIVIA POPE IN TV  
SERIES' *SCANDAL SEASON 1***

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**ABSTRAK**

Masih kurangnya penampilan aktris *African-American* yang merepresentasikan gambaran karakter positif wanita kulit hitam di film atau acara televisi Amerika, ketika kemunculan Olivia Pope di *Scandal* membuat satu terobosan baru. Dengan menggunakan beberapa pemikiran dari feminis-feminis kulit hitam, terutama dari Patricia Hill Collins, penulis mencoba menelaah apakah gambaran-gambaran yang melekat pada wanita kulit hitam masih ada di zaman sekarang ini. Maksud tujuan tulisan ini adalah untuk menganalisa apakah Olivia Pope merepresentasikan seorang sosok wanita kulit hitam modern atau masih berada di bawah bayang-bayang gambaran lama wanita kulit hitam zaman dahulu. Dalam mencari fakta-fakta untuk mendukung penulisan, penulis menggunakan studi pustaka melalui pengamatan mendalam serial televisi *Scandal Season 1* dan membaca beberapa penelitian terdahulu, *e-books*, dan jurnal yang mengacu pada objek. Penulis menemukan bahwa Olivia Pope sebagai seorang karakter utama di dalam sebuah serial televisi, merepresentasikan sebuah gambaran positif baru untuk sosok wanita Afrika-Amerika sebagai seorang wanita yang kuat, tangguh, dan berani.

Kata kunci: Wanita Afrika-Amerika, Representasi Wanita Kulit Hitam, Olivia Pope, *Scandal*

## A. INTRODUCTION

### 1. Background of the Study

The concept of popular culture is referred to a product of the people and it is made of “*an everyday terrain of the people*” (Freccero, 1993:14). Popular culture has affected people’s desire of creating a new culture, *vice versa*, “*popular culture reflects and expresses the aesthetic and other wants of many people (thus making it culture and not just commercial menace)*” (Gans, 1974:vii). It is also cannot be turned aside that American culture has spreading and becoming one of world’s role model of new and modern culture. According to Robin Nelson, television series refers to a ‘new affective order’, meaning that television series “*play an important role in the replacement of more traditional narratives by experimental ones which is currently underway in audiovisual media*” (Allrath & Gymnich, 2005:4). Moreover, there is only a little number of television show that raises its leading character with a non-White woman who has an expertise in politics. *Scandal* is the leading of television show that raises this kind of genre (King, 2015:46).

Tracing back to the United States of America’s era of slavery, the African American people were already being the object of discrimination. The Blacks were restricted by the Whites from their rights to have decent jobs, good neighborhoods, and suffrage. The discrimination was even tougher for the Black women back then. As bell-hooks states in *Ain’t I a Woman?* there is “*no scholarly attention has been given to the oppression of black women during slavery*” (hooks, 1981:37). In the plantation field, Black women, as slaves, had to work with the same amount of the works of Black men slaves. If they did not fulfill the target, they would get punishment from the White overseers to be kicked, whipped, or naked (hooks, 1981:40). Some negative stereotypes or controlling images emerged since then. Until the modern era, the African American women have been living with many negative controlling images among them. The images of mammy, jezebel, and sapphire have adhered to them. Those controlling images help the Black women’s oppressions

justify (Collins, 2000:69). In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the ways of oppressions toward African American women are getting more diverse as it is an era of Third Wave Feminism. These women have to strive for the better lives in the middle of the demand to achieve more. The character of Olivia Pope in *Scandal* is being the representation of Third Wave Feminist as she faces more complicated issues to be solved. She is educated and also has decent job, yet she has to deal with the dilemma between her heart and how to take care of many conflicts.

*Scandal* is an American political drama television series which presents for five seasons from 2012 (season 1) to 2016 (season 5) with 90 episodes and soon to be announced for the 6th season in 2017. The show is created by Shonda Rhimes and produced by American Broadcasting Company (ABC) Studios and ShondaLand. *Scandal* is one of not so many television series that takes African American women as its main protagonist character, Olivia Pope. Olivia Pope is being the “*progressive shift in the representation of Black female characters in mainstream television*” (Mia, 2015, Vol 45 (1):8). The main stories of *Scandal* are the relationship between Olivia Pope and the President Fitzgerald Grant III along with Olivia and the team solving many cases to save problems and reputation of elites in the Washington D.C. The main story continues in every episodes while the other new cases has to be solved. Since April 5, 2012, the first airing of *Scandal*, the eyes of millions Americans have never left to miss out one single episode of the show. It has been proven by the recognition and awards that *Scandal* gets. The rating says it all knowing that there are 7.3 million of viewers in the premiere of *Scandal Season 1* while in the premiere episode of *Scandal Season 5* there are 10.2 million viewers (Moraes, 2016).

## **2. Aims of the Study**

The purpose of this study are to analyze the intrinsic aspects of *Scandal Season 1*, and to reveal and describe the representation of African American woman in the character of Olivia Pope in *Scandal Season 1*.

### **3. Method of the Study**

In the writing, the writer collects the data from watching the series and looking for another sources from some previous studies, books, e-books, journals, articles, and websites. The writer watches *Scandal TV Series* from season 1 (2012) to season 5 (2016) and gives her special attention to season 1 as it is being more discussed in the writing, while another seasons are being noticed as it is important to see the development of the Olivia Pope's character in the show. In addition, the writer uses the historical approach through stereotypes of African American women plus the thoughts from some modern black feminists to analyze the character of Olivia Pope in *Scandal Season 1*.

## **B. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **1. Black Feminist Thoughts**

Patricia Hill Collins argues that African-American women are in the unique position to understand how oppression works because of their experiences at the intersections of race, class and gender based oppressions (2000: 45). Collins uses everyday experiences, ideas and voices of black women to portray the perspective of them. She uses these terms of "*oppressions intersectionality*" and "*matrix of domination*" as all of the oppressions toward black women is interlocked one another. To quote from her book,

Intersectionality refers to particular forms of intersecting oppressions, for example, intersections of race and gender, or of sexuality and nation. Intersectional paradigms remind us that oppression cannot be reduced to one fundamental type, and that oppressions work together in producing injustice. In contrast, the matrix of domination refers to how these intersecting oppressions are actually organized. Regardless of the particular intersections involved, structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal domains of power reappear across quite different forms of oppression (Collins, 2008: 18).

Other Black feminist thought comes from Bell Hooks who states the word "wildness" because there is a doubt if the black women character are not portrayed as victims.

Depicting black woman as not a victim is the new self-defined (Hooks, 1992: 86). In the modern era, the struggle of Black women represents a revolution. Revolution is indeed a serious thing because it has to be for a lifetime struggle. Then, bell hooks says Black women revolution is “*made thrilling by risk and confrontation and made glamorous by costume*” (hooks, 1992: 101).

## **2. Controlling Images of African-American Women**

African American women have been living with many negative controlling images among them. There is no actual definition of the word “*controlling image*”, instead Patricia Hill Collins often times uses that word to specifically define the stereotypes which cling toward African American women. One of Collins’ statement about the use of “*controlling image*” term is:

These self-definitions of Black womanhood were designed to resist the negative controlling images of Black womanhood advanced by Whites as well as the discriminatory social practices that these controlling images supported. In all, Black women’s participation in crafting a constantly changing African-American culture fostered distinctively Black and womencentered worldviews (Collins, 2000: 10).

Famous controlling images for the Black women are the mammy, the jezebel, the sapphire, and the strong black women which surely affect their confidence and self-esteem in living their lives. As Patricia Hill Collins states “*portraying African American women as stereotypical mummies, matriarchs, welfare recipients and hot mammas helps justify US black women’s oppression*” (Collins, 2000: 69). “*These stereotypes exist, are interpreted, understood, and reinscribed within larger social and historical narratives that have a long history in U.S. society.*” (Dill & Zambrana, 2009: 10). Those thoughts show that these stereotypes have rooted back in the slavery era particularly in the Southern where the Blacks are slaved under the Whites’ commands. Black women in particular are being the victim of the Whites’ brutality and immoral behavior during slavery era. They are willing to devote all of their lives to be the Whites’ servant (the mammy), are being the object of

their White masters' sexual desire (the jezebel), and are being called as the angry black women (the sapphire).

#### **a. The Mammy**

The mammy stereotype is basically a domestic worker in the White masters' house and family. The mammy symbolizes as the caregiver who devotes her whole life to the Whites'. It is described as an image with characteristics of "*cold and callous, even neglectful of her own children and family while being overly solicitous toward Whites*" (Ladson-Billings, 2009: 89). The mammy's physical appearance is usually portrayed as dark-skinned, unattractive and overweight (2000: 89). Furthermore, the image of the mammy is depicted by Christian in *Black Women Novelists* as:

Black in color as well as race and fat with enormous breasts that are full enough to nourish all the children in the world; her head is perpetually covered with her trademark kerchief to hide the kinky hair that marks her as ugly. Tied to her physical characteristics are her personality traits: she is strong, for she certainly has enough girth, but this strength is used in the service to her white master and as a way of keeping her male counterparts in check; she is kind and loyal, for she is a mother; she is sexless. (1980:12-13)

Collins adds that, "*the mammy image is central to intersecting oppressions of race, gender, sexuality, and class*" (2000: 73). As an addition, Melissa Harris-Perry states that the mammy image has two sides of perspectives, whether it uses to create the justice of past slavery or to forgive the nowadays oppressions (2011: 76).

#### **b. The Jezebel**

The jezebel stereotype is symbolized as "*a loud and verbally abusive matriarch*" (Harris-Perry, 2011: 85; Collins, 2000: 75). The jezebel is the representation of a "*whore*" who likes to seduce her White master. In fact, the jezebels are actually being the White masters' victim to fulfill their sexual desires. They are forced to have sex and bear children

who will be sold as slaves' children in the market. To quote Harris- Perry in *Sister Citizen*, the jezebel is:

The idea that black women were hypersexual beings created space for white moral superiority by justifying the brutality of Southern white men... Emancipation did not end the social and political usefulness of this sexual stereotype. White men's "right" of access to black women's bodies was an assumption supported both by their history as legal property and by the myth of their sexual promiscuity. This myth meant that neither the law nor social convention allowed that black women might be victims in this arrangement. The rape of black women, like the lynching of black men, was both a deep personal violence and a form of community terrorism that reinforced their vulnerability and lack of self-ownership. (Harris-Perry, 2011: 52-54)

### **c. The Sapphire**

The Sapphire stereotype depicts Black women as the matriarch women who are "*shrill, loud, argumentative, irrationally angry, and verbally abusive*" (Harris-Perry, 2011: 66). The sapphire relates to the image of 'the angry black women' as the representation of the women who easily get angry at anything. The Sapphire represents the image of Black women who are likely to say rude words, for example "*son of a bitch, goddamnit, asshole, etc*". In the outside of the Black women's society, most of them can retrain their anger, but not their rude actions. In fact, they can easily get angry if they are in a situation among Black women. To be highlighted, the term of angry here does not mean that they will be mad at anything, instead it is their actions.

### **d. The Strong Black Woman**

The strong black woman is a positive stereotype to overcome all three negative stereotypes before. The strong black woman stereotype or 'the superwoman complex' is created by the African American women as a result to strive against all negative stereotypes that are made by the Whites (Harris-Perry, 2011: 200). The stereotype also empowers black women as "it shares the racialized perception of Black people as tough and strong and shares the gendered perception of women as communal and caring (West, Donovan, &

Daniel, 2016: 391)”. To add, Harris-Perry in *Sister Citizen* also states that “*in their efforts to evade the Sapphire stereotype, black women may be discouraged from demanding equal consideration of their specific political needs within black political discourses*” (2011: 95). It shows that the strong black woman is the stereotype that reinforces the position of the Black women in the modern society. This stereotype could be a new chance for the Black women to speak up for their rights.

### **C. SCANDAL SEASON 1 ANALYSIS**

#### **1. The Mammy**

The depiction of the mammy in the character of Olivia Pope is quite clear to see throughout the whole season. The mammy controlling image that refers to Black woman who serves the Whites is matched with Olivia’s clients who mostly are White. Many of her clients are the Whites high-leveled elites and politicians. Olivia has to solve and clean up her clients’ mess, while she herself has her own problems. The case of Amanda Tanner throughout the first season is one of the moments which shows the mammy characteristic. She stands up for the right of Amanda and strives for it. Olivia puts her efforts for the purpose of protecting Amanda. Even though Olivia has a feeling with the President, she puts aside her own feeling just to reveal the truth and protect her client. Olivia keeps talking about the truth and possibility that can be happen if Amanda keeps forcing her ego. Olivia even lets Amanda to stay at her apartment which in fact Amanda is a total stranger for her. All that Olivia does for Amanda depicts the Mammy characteristic.

Olivia’s role as a key point and strategic leader during the Fitz’s presidential campaign also depicts the Mammy image. Since her bravery to tell the truth why Fitz cannot win the election, Fitz puts his biggest attention to Olivia. Olivia stands out to say the fact that the failure of Fitz’s campaign is because of the lack of Fitz and his wife relationship. After that, Olivia is being the coordinator of Fitz’s presidential campaign. Fitz and Olivia secretly fall in love to each other, yet Olivia keeps her feeling aside because she

is a professional. All of her creative strategies only has an aim to win the election without thinking about her own feeling. In this job, she never gets credited for it.

## **2. The Jezebel**

The Jezebel relates to an image that represents African American woman as an object for the White masters to fulfill their sexual desires. The jezebel image in Olivia Pope can be related with her relationship with the President Fitzgerald Grant. Both of them have been secretly having an affair since the presidential election campaign. Olivia cannot deny her feelings, she wants to leave him but Fitz really loves him and admits that she is the love of his life. Olivia wants to end the affair, yet the President cannot let her go and it leads to unfinished dilemma. A circumstance when a White married man having an affair with a young Black woman expresses the Jezebel characteristic like a White master who only wants to take advantage of a young Black woman slave.

In addition, it is revealed that as the time passes, Mellie knows about Olivia and Fitz's affair. Mellie which is Fitz's wife represent the White master's wife who finds out the affair between her husband and the Black woman slave. Mellie is angry and puts the blame on Olivia because Olivia leaves him. It looks like the relationship between a black woman slave and a White master's wife. Even though the master's wife witnesses the affair directly, she can deal with the condition of her husband. In this case, Mellie Grant is angry because Olivia refuses to take up her role as Jezebel. Then, instead of putting the blame on herself or Fitz, Mellie would rather to put the blame on Olivia after all.

## **3. The Sapphire**

The Sapphire stereotype is also popular with another term "the Angry Black Woman" (ABW). An image of bold, clear, thorough, and straight to the point woman who loves to do anything to get things done is surely matched with the character of Olivia Pope. Olivia clearly says what she wants and what she is going to do next without any doubt. She is not afraid about anything no matter how hard the situation is and how tough her

opponents are. Some of Olivia Pope's actions portray the image of the sapphire. Olivia has to deal with Russian Gangster, in fact she challenges them to argue and debate. Instead, the gangster turns to be the one who feels threatened back by her.

The other facts that show the sapphire image are the Olivia's nasty behavior who likes to threaten Cyrus Beene and David Rosen, the US Chief of Attorney, only to protect her clients. Olivia will do anything to get things done related to her clients' cases including speaks about the facts and evidences loudly, thoroughly, and clearly. This kind of characteristic represents the sapphire image in Olivia Pope.

#### **4. The Strong Black Woman**

The strong black woman is a positive image that overcome the mammy, jezebel, and sapphire images of African American woman. All three other images show the vulnerable and helplessness depictions of African American woman. The strong black woman appears as the resistance. The word 'strong' here represents an image of a tough and powerful woman who in fact her heart is break into million pieces at the inside, but she could handle it and stands up no matter what. The image of Olivia as the finest and respected woman in DC is fitted with the strong black woman.

In episode 4, *Enemy of the State*, there is a scene when Stephen comes to Olivia's apartment and he finds out that Olivia nearly cries and her body trembles. Olivia cannot even barely move her body. She tries to calm down herself and pretends that she can handle all of the problems. Olivia is shocked knowing that Amanda is pregnant with the President, the man Olivia secretly in love. She could barely carry on the burden of her chaotic sentiment. Stephen tells her that there is no shame if she says that she cannot handle the situation. Olivia gets up and says, "I can handle anything". Her heart breaks and she gets hurt, but she decides to leave it all behind. Whether she is pretending her own feelings or not, she chooses to stand up and fight for it. It really depicts the image of strong Black woman.

The other fact that show the representation of strong black woman image is the people's response and appreciation toward Olivia Pope. The moment when Quinn hears the name of "Olivia Pope" for the very first time, Quinn stops breathing and gets shocked. After underestimating Harrison, without even thinking about anything, she directly say yes to join the gladiators. It shows the admiration of people with the Olivia Pope's fame and reputation. The other proof is the White House's guard praises her awesome job in making every situation back to normal in episode 7. A lot of people also say the same sentence like "if you want something done, get Olivia Pope on it". These evidences undoubtable are being the depiction of how Olivia Pope successfully portrays the strong black women stereotype.

#### **D. CONCLUSION**

The image of African American women in America has slowly moved into a better and clearer path in every aspect of their lives in the future. The negative controlling images of Black women have to be overcome. As the time goes, Black women have the bravery to pull down those kinds of the mammy, jezebel, and sapphire images by using their intelligence, attitudes, and abilities. The lack of Black women's positive characters in American movies and television represents the controlling images that are embedded to them in modern society. It indicates that the Black women have to double their efforts in order to be able to represent a good image of them.

The appearance of Kerry Washington in playing the character of Olivia Pope as the lead character in *Scandal*, makes the negative images slowly faded. Olivia Pope represents a figure of modern African-American woman with new portrayal of Black women's controlling images. Olivia Pope makes a new breakthrough as her vital position in the government depicting that African American woman is reliable enough. Olivia Pope's character as a bold, strong, sophisticated and highly-educated Black woman has successfully overcome those negative images and built the modern image of a strong black woman. She may still follow the controlling images, yet in different framework and

condition as the series' setting is in modern era in which the growing of African-American women's social status starts to be recognized by the society. Therefore, she inspires the other Black women to stand up for their beliefs and abilities.

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