

Do African-American Female Stereotypes Still Exist in Television? A Descriptive Character Analysis of Olivia Pope

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Abstract

Scandal, the first network drama in decades to star an African-American woman, reaches millions of viewers on a weekly basis. This study examined if main character Olivia Pope is a reflection of popular African-American female stereotypes in television. A sample of nine episodes was used to quantitatively measure whether Pope exemplifies the “Mammy,” the “Jezebel,” or the “Sapphire.” Analysis showed that although Pope embodies characteristics of all these stereotypes, they are presented in a different way than what is commonly seen on television.

I. Introduction

African-American Actress Kerry Washington stars in *Scandal*, a primetime network television drama. *Scandal* follows the story of Olivia Pope, a prominent Washington, D.C., fixer, who handles crises and public relations for her high-level political clients while also dealing with her own indiscretions. One of the unique central themes in *Scandal* is the portrayal of “an African-American women as the successful manager of a firm, employing a racially diverse group of people, but without using the potential racial dynamic as a central trope” (McKnight, 2014, p. 184).

Pope was chosen for this study because she is leading the “progressive shift in the representation of Black female characters in mainstream television” (Mask, 2015, p. 8). Unlike most African-American women seen today on television, the character played by Washington is both dark-skinned and beautiful, while also romantically and sexually desirable (Everett, 2015, p. 37). Pope differs from other strong African-American television characters, such as Claire Huxtable on *The Cosby Show*, who portrayed another prominent African-American television character, and was a lawyer, a mother, and was equated to June Cleaver or Margaret Anderson (Pixley, 2015, p. 30). As a character, Huxtable was criticized as being too perfect for any real person to live up to (Pixley, 2015 p. 30). According to Mia Mask, Pope represents a new kind of multidimensional character who has rarely been seen before on television (Mask, 2015 p. 7). Mask goes on to say that unlike unrealistic or unrelated characters, characters like Pope have “lives that reflect the emotional breadth, psychological depth, diasporic range and multivalent variance” (p. 7).

A character like Pope is a first for primetime television. Even though she appears to be a new kind of character, this study examines if she still follows old stereotypes that have been used to describe African-American females portraying film and television characters for decades. This study looked at selected

Keywords: *Scandal, African-American, stereotype, television, Olivia Pope*
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This undergraduate project was conducted as a partial requirement of a research course in communications.

Scandal episodes and analyzes the Pope character against those frequently used African-American female stereotypes.

This study is important in today's society because stereotyping African-American women can have damaging effects. Hudson (1998) notes, "Stereotypes simultaneously reflect and distort the ways in which Black women view themselves (individually and collectively) and in which they are viewed by others" (Hudson, 1998, p. 249). Media depictions of characters can form certain opinions of entire racial and gender groups regardless of their merit. *Scandal*'s popularity has resulted in the character of Pope to be widely exposed. As a result, she is now another character that African-American women can be compared to, so consideration of information about the stereotypes Pope exemplifies can help determine if those comparisons will be positive or negative.

II. Literature Review

Scandal is the third network television drama created by screenwriter and producer Shonda Rhimes. It premiered on the American Broadcasting Company network in 2012. Rhimes is known for creating "complex, driven, powerful and flawed women who anchor her dramas" (Everett, 2015 p. 38). Her characters and storylines attest to the immense popularity of her shows. Pixley (2015) reported that *Scandal* was the 12th most watched network television broadcast and the second most viewed primetime network drama, according to a 2013 Nielsen poll. This level of success surrounding a television drama starring an African-American female is largely unprecedented. According to the *The Hollywood Diversity Report* on the 2011-2012 season, actors from a racial or ethnic minority only had 5.1 percent of starring roles in broadcast comedies and dramas (Erigha, 2015, p.10). Kerry Washington is now recognized as the first African-American female lead on a network drama since Teresa Graves starred in *Get Christie Love* in 1974 (Evans, 2014).

As a character, Pope has been described as revolutionary (Everett, 2015). Mask (2015) describes her character's life as being "full of contradictions and innumerable complexities, the likes of which we haven't seen in Black women's lives as represented in mainstream culture" (p. 5). This study looks at whether or not Pope's character still adheres to recurrent African-American stereotypes in television. The stereotypes this study chose as a framework of analysis are the Mammy, the Jezebel, and the Sapphire. These stereotypes have been used to describe African-American women since slavery and are still much apparent in today's society (Ladson-Billings, 2009).

The Mammy can be described as being the caregiver. This stereotype stems from slavery when African-American women raised the children of their masters. She is seen as being "cold and callous, even neglectful of her own children and family while being overly solicitous toward Whites" (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 89). Physically, the Mammy is seen as being dark-skinned, unattractive and overweight (p. 89). Ladson-Billings equates the character of the Mammy as being similar to the character of "Aunt Jemima," who is the iconic maternal figure on the pancake box (p. 89). Ladson-Billings goes on to list early film actresses who clearly represent the Mammy stereotype, such as Hattie McDaniels, Louise Beavers, and Ethel Waters (Ladson-Billings, 2009).

The Jezebel is another popular stereotype used to describe African-American women. The Jezebel can be traced back to the Bible, since Jezebel was the name of a queen who turned her husband King Ahab's heart away from worshiping God. Today, the Jezebel is better known as a promiscuous, manipulative seductress (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Physically, the Jezebel is seen as being very attractive and often Mulatto. According to Ladson-Billings (2009), examples include Dorothy Dandridge, Lena Horne, and Halle Berry as actresses who often play the role of the Jezebel.

The Sapphire is the African-American women who are seen as being "stubborn, bitchy, bossy and hateful" (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 89). The name of the Sapphire comes from the character Ernestine Ward portrayed in *The Amos 'n' Andy* television show in the 1950s. This stereotype, which has been used again and again as the character of a "mad Black woman," continues to sell.

Scandal's immense popularity can prove Pope to be one of crossover characters, those who are "rooted in a specific tradition with a specific audience, [but can still] appeal to multiple subcultures without losing their original audience" (Erigha, 2015, p. 10). This study examines whether a crossover character like Pope can exist without the use of African-American stereotypes: again the Mammy, the Jezebel and the

Sapphire. It is important to note that these stereotypes may be embodied in an individual character separately or simultaneously.

III. Methods

As of April 2015, *Scandal* has aired 69 episodes within the four seasons since the series premiered. A sample of nine episodes was chosen to analyze Pope's character against the framework of recurrent African-American female stereotypes in mainstream television. In order to analyze the wide spectrum of episodes, every eighth episode up to the most recent episode aired was selected. This method produced one episode from the first season, three episodes from the second and third season each, and two episodes from the fourth season.

For this study, the author watched all nine episodes in their entirety through Netflix and Hulu. The author made note whenever the character Pope exemplified a popular African-American female stereotype: the Mammy, the Jezebel, and the Sapphire. The author counted how many times the actor exemplified one of the three stereotypes.

IV. Analysis and Discussion

The author analyzed nine selected episodes of *Scandal*. Within those episodes, the author looked for specific examples of when the character of Pope exemplified the Mammy, the Jezebel, and the Sapphire. The author found 15 examples of Pope portraying the Mammy character during the nine sampled episodes. Pope acts as the Mammy since her entire company of Pope and Associates is based on helping and caring for the rich, White and powerful. She consistently acts as an unrelenting advocate for her clients. She redefines the role of the caregiver because she is being personally sought out and paid to do so, even though she is still caring for rich White men and their children as Mammies did during slavery.

For example, during season 2, episode 17, titled "Snake in the Garden," Hollis Doyle, a rich White lobbyist for a Texas energy company, seeks out Pope's services in order to find his kidnapped daughter. Pope genuinely does not like Doyle and has had countless issues with him. Pope still takes on the case and works tirelessly for Doyle even when her associates were against helping him because in the words of Pope "even the devil loves his kids" (Rhimes, 2012).

One of *Scandal*'s major themes involves the illicit interracial relationship between African-American Washington, D.C., fixer Pope and the White married Republican president of the United States Fitzgerald Grant. This overarching theme alone already paints Pope as the Jezebel. Pope contradicts the Mammy stereotype: "Black women are considered unattractive and unmarriageable . . . [and] are rarely depicted as objects of desire on television" (Warner, 2015, p. 18). Pope is already more closely related to the Jezebel since Pope is portrayed as being a beautiful and desired character by many. There were only four instances where Pope truly embodied the Jezebel and acted as a seductress. There were 10 instances of the opposite where powerful men tried to seduce her. In addition to her affair with the president, Pope is also seduced by Captain Jake Ballard, who worked in the intelligence department at the Pentagon and later acted as commander for a top-secret CIA subdivision called B6-13. These two powerful White men continuously tried to seduce Pope. During season 3, episode 2, titled "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner," the president of the United States admits his love for Pope and his willingness to do anything for her, even if it means divorcing his wife and leaving office (Rhimes, 2012).

Pope runs a very highly regarded crisis management firm in *Scandal*. She and her associates refer to themselves as being "gladiators in suits." The term gladiator in this way attests to "the level of professionalism, dedication and execution that Olivia Pope embodies" (Evans, 2014, p. 8). As a gladiator, she also embodies the Sapphire, since in media "Black women are often portrayed as loud and/or angry" (Adams-Bass, Bentley-Edwards, & Stevenson, 2014, p. 92). In all of the sampled episodes, Pope is shown taking charge of situations whether it involves talking back to political officials, throwing out the director of the CIA, or threatening the U.S. Attorney's Office. In the pilot episode of *Scandal*, titled "Sweet Baby," Pope is introduced in a scene where she stands up to Ukrainian mobsters (Rhimes, 2012).

Through analyzing nine sampled episodes of *Scandal*, the author has concluded that Pope possesses qualities from all three popular African-American television stereotypes. However, she reflects different aspects of the stereotypes. Her Mammy qualities show that she is good at her job since she is always supportive of her clients, regardless of how much power they may have. Her affair with the president paints her as a Jezebel, but she tries repeatedly to end the relationship, only to have the president continue to entice her. She may be portrayed as a Sapphire for yelling at high-level political officials, but unlike the Sapphires of the past, Pope has the education and the expertise to confidently go up against these high ranking officials.

V. Conclusion

In 2012, *Scandal* premiered on the American Broadcast Company network to 7.33 million viewers (Bibel, 2012). In 2014, *Scandal*'s 4th season premiered to 11.96 million viewers. (Kondolojy, 2014). *Scandal*'s popularity has not been affected because African-American women held a starring role in a mainstream network television drama. Pope does embody characteristics of the Mammy, the Jezebel, and the Sapphire, but she does so in ways that are not often seen in today's mainstream media.

This study has its limitations. Only 9 out of the 69 episodes that have aired were sampled. Future studies may sample more episodes for more accurate analysis. A similar study can be conducted by analyzing Rhimes' newest primetime television show, *How to Get Away With Murder*, which also stars an African-American female, Viola Davis.

Acknowledgments

The author would like to extend its thanks to Don Grady, associate dean in the School of Communications at Elon University, for without his guidance and advice this paper could not have been written. The author also thanks the School of Communications and the many reviewers who contributed to the revision of this paper.

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