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Film 110B – Professor Ali Na

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bell hooks and Pariah: A Cultural Analysis

The black female spectator historically has been subject to exclusion by the mainstream media. Throughout much of the past women of colour have been subjected to roles that pigeonhole them and place them in stereotype. These roles have not been leading or multi-dimensional. By dissecting *the oppositional gaze: black female spectator* (hooks 1996), we can better understand how *Pariah* (Rees 2011) is an important departure from these dangerous norms and expectations surrounding the image of the black women in media.

This essay will be discussing the 2011 Dee Rees film, with emphasis on a single scene (*Pariah* 6:25-7:28). The scene that this essay will focus on is the scene where the main character, Alike, comes home after a night out and is greeted by her mother, Audrey. Although there are many noteworthy scenes in this movie, this scene contains an important amount of subtlety and complexity. The scene begins with Alike and her Audrey, with their backs to the camera. It becomes clear that Alike has just come back from begin out, and her mother has come into the room to question her. Colour in the scene is important, as it is very dark, with only small amounts of green and orange light illuminating the figures. Audrey begins to question Alike about where she has been, why she is late, and mentions her curfew is broken. Alike explains that she lost track of time. Although it seems that the two women are going to fight, Audrey suddenly changes the topic to Alike's clothes. She mentions how cute the outfit

she is wearing is and offers for the two of them to go shopping. At this point Alike cuts her off and tells her goodnight, obviously uninterested in continuing the conversation. Audrey begins to get mad at Alike again, telling her to wrap her hair, wash her face, and the issues she has with Alike's friends. Audrey leaves as Alike takes off her head wrap. This is the end of this short scene.

This scene is incredibly important for a few reasons. The first reason being the status and importance of black women on the screen. The only characters in the scene are black women, and the main characters of the movie are all black women (*Pariah* 6:25-7:28). Having black female bodies represented on the screen in a way that is non-exclusionary and that considers them as the main characters is incredibly noteworthy. This concept of exclusion is heavily discussed by bell hooks in *the oppositional gaze: black female spectators*. bell hooks writes about how black women never go to the cinema expecting to see themselves on screen (hooks 201). Additionally, she writes about how black women are never the leads or main characters of a story or scene. The oppositional gaze that hooks' developed created a kind of pain over the absence of black women. By analyzing this scene across hooks' writing the viewer can begin to understand the impact that the oppositional gaze can have. Evidently Dee Rees, who is a black woman, directed *Pariah* with the inclusion of black women in mind. Therefore, Dee Rees has engaged in oppositional gaze, and created work that is crucial to the black female spectator. The anti-anti-black women attitude is shown in full flight in *Pariah*, as the movie nearly only includes black women.

Although the mere presence of black women on screen is important, the ways on which these women are portrayed is equally important. As bell hooks reminds us, black women are

often shown as mummies, or with violence, or within another stereotype, or simply as a way to communicate their own blackness within the needs of non-black characters (hooks 203). These characters are single-dimensional, and often unrealistic. The reason why this scene is important to look at is because the two women are shown as complex, unique, flawed, and realistic (*Pariah* 6:25-7:28). The characters have a conversation that most people can relate to, and that can be dissected to reveal much bigger parts of their personalities. The two women have a dynamic that is complicated, and relatable. Additionally, the characters do not discuss their own blackness in relation to a non-black world. The characters do not exist just to be black, but rather exist as individuals, who happen to be black amongst many other things. This conversation is so important to watch when looking to examine the complexities of black women in media. The existence of these scenes is important to help rectify the portrayals of one-dimensional characters in movies. Using the history of two-dimension black women in media, and cross referencing it with the oppositional gaze introduced by bell hooks, the viewer can understand the weight of a conversation like this in media, and how this type of conversation aids in the advancement of black women across all mediums.

By examining this scene, it becomes clear that the changing landscape of media presents opportunities for a more fair and realistic portrayal of all in media, especially the black woman. The important takeaways from bell hooks' writings are important in guiding a conversation about the representation of black women in media and can help form media that includes dynamic and complex black-female leads, much like the ones found in *Pariah* (Rees 2011).

Works Cited:

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