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Reclaiming Our Time: An analysis of Jasmine Sullivan's Heaux Tales

Jasmine Sullivan's song *Tragic* begins with an soundbite of Maxine Waters, a U.S. congresswoman known for being a strong black female voice in society and politics. While the song is about tragic male sexual partners, the excerpt of Maxine Waters foreshadows the bigger issue, women are no longer accepting male disrespect. While women for generations have been raised to become breeders and partners, a generation of online dating apps and anti-marriage culture has created a universal identity crisis. The term love has lost many of its definitions, leaving many women unaware of how to maneuver in our current social moment. The push and pull of hookup culture has eliminated most women's want for intimacy or created an expectation of settling for less. What are the lasting effects of this? A new wave of women who are suffering in emotionally, physically, and sexually abusive relationships. Nevertheless, women in positions of influence are rewriting the narrative that they are the victims -of hypermasculinity. Grammy-nominated R&B singer and songwriter Jasmine Sullivan's Heaux Tales is a fourteen-song project exploring the ebbs and flows of relationships in our current dating culture. Through her lyrics, Sullivan inspires a degraded generation of women into a rebellion of self-worth, sexual liberation, and redefinition of femininity.

For generations, men have degraded women as purely sexual objects, and today's media has reiterated these beliefs. From characters from the 1970s like Chester the Molester appearing in magazines plotting to take female children (Dines and Perea 197) to current rappers like

Future using music to push a fantasy of abundant "no-strings-attached sex", society forces women to believe that they must fit these molds and marry these men. Not only does this media promote a female submissive nature, but it also pushes an intense masculine stereotype that many men try to fill. In a study "Gender Identity, Self-Esteem, and Abuse in Dating Relationships," three psychologists explore identity theory by examining data collected from college dating relationships. They found that "Essentially it has been held that abusive men have an extreme and compulsive masculine identification and inflict abuse to display their masculinity." (Burke et al. 273) However, who created the societal belief that men and women are programmed differently purely because of genitalia? Our society has allowed our biology to determine the societal roles that we live in and ultimately created a divide. In the Differences chapter of the Theory Toolbox, the book explores the question of whether gender determines our identity,

It's not that bodies don't exist, or that things don't happen; nor is it the case that history or subjectivity or sexuality can be arranged or rearranged any old way you want. Rather, "social construction" forces us to confront that the materiality of difference doesn't determine what the difference means. Things don't already contain meanings; rather, such meanings are constructed in the very configuration of the seeming "fact" of difference."

(Thomas and Giroux 108)

While men and women differ in sexual reproductive organs, the patriarchal society has developed a narrative of a hierarchy of gender with damaging stereotypes because this belief is beneficial. Hypermasculinity supports the world we live in today, and as times have changed, women are now changing the mold.

Yet this leaves the reader with the question, how do women fall in love with men of these ideals? Jasmine Sullivan defines her own experience falling into the trap of hypermasculinity.

Sullivan includes an audiotape on her most recent extended EP *Heaux Tales Mo Tales* that says,

Essentially growing up feeling undesirable, When I got older, and I had a man that desired me. It validated me and made me feel good about myself. Therefore, the content that the validation brought me was worth the actual pain that the relationship eventually brought. (Sullivan 0:22)

This tale voiced by Sullivan is a common trope that women who survive abusive relationships endure. In a society that deems anyone different from the desirable woman portrayed in media as ugly or undesirable, many women in our current contemporary U.S. society search for validation in their male partners.

While women navigate the world in a vulnerable state, patriarchal society has prepared them to fall into their role of the ideal submissive female. The stereotypes and beliefs of the male-oriented society that developed this idea of the "perfect little woman" created the proclaimed definition of hyper-femininity. This definition is explored in the study, "Hyper femininity: Measurement and Initial Validation of Construction",

Hyperfemininity was defined as exaggerated adherence to a stereotypic feminine gender role. It was proposed that the hyperfeminine woman believes that her success is determined by developing and maintaining a relationship with a man and that their primary value in a romantic relationship is her sexuality; hyperfeminine women use their sexuality to obtain the goal of relationship maintenance. Hyperfeminine women were proposed to hold expectations that men will also uphold their part in a traditional

relationship—that of aggressive, sometimes forceful, initiators of sexual activity.

(Murnen and Byrne 408)

However, in *Heaux Tales*, Jasmine Sullivan takes this narrative and brings attention to it. In a track titled *Amanda's Tale*, the subject explains her feelings towards not feeling confident with being with one person today combatting social media and pop culture except for her confidence in a man returning due to her sexual abilities. She quotes, "Even if you don't really want me. I know you gon' want that; in one way, it's empowering; in another way, it's sad. I feel moments of sadness knowing that, you know, just me alone and who I am is not enough (Sullivan 0:22)". Sullivan uses this tale, followed by the song *Girl Like Me* featuring Grammy-award winning singer H.E.R., to resonate with her listeners and their struggles with identity and femininity.

As a young black woman growing up in today's world, dating and developing relationships feels dangerous. For example, as a college student, there are already so many stereotypes and beliefs associated with attending an all-women's college or being comfortable with yourself. As women, we are prompted to accept men at this stage in life as they are without question while simultaneously trying to stay desirable. Nevertheless, women who choose to stick to their studies and wait for "the right one" (another damaging ideology) are stereotyped as missing the college experience. Being a woman feels impossible in our current contemporary moment, a war without refuge. So many women look to escape our restricting reality through media like music and television.

Music has been a form of protest and rebellion throughout generations of movements, and in today's pop culture, women change the narrative through song. Artists like The City Girls and Megan Thee Stallion are trailblazing in the hip hop genre, and singers like Doja Cat,

Summer Walker and aforementioned Jasmine Sullivan have become legends in the R&B music world. Through social media platforms like TikTok that can turn a song into a trend in a matter of hours, and lyrics that no longer are censored of the female life and relationship experience, many women find themselves at the dawn of a new time. A time when women can be accepted as strong sexual beings that are no longer restricted by the male gaze.

Children are sectioned and divided into feminine and masculine games and identities from birth as a reflex of how generations have been taught. To the colors, we use as signifiers to the lessons we teach the next generations, if society does not change the societal systems, the world will continue to produce these damaging gender roles. As members of the future, women should be grateful for leaders like Jasmine Sullivan, who, through music, are healing women's bruised ideas of self, sexuality, and femininity.

### Work Cited

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