

ESCAPING SELF-SACRIFICE: Changing Black Women’s Relationship with Servility



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ABSTRACT

This work “Escaping Self-Sacrifice: Changing Black Women’s Relationship with Servility” is a deep dive into Lisa Tessman’s *Burdened Virtues*. Addressing the idea of servility as a burdened virtue that requires self-sacrifice, I strive to reevaluate the traditional role Black women have in their families and within their communities. I argue that the demands of Black women are so excessive that they have lost touch with their self-regarding virtues, causing them to have ethical imbalances within themselves. This work is a part of an ongoing attempt to counter oppressive practices with joy as a form of resistance. I use the idea that simply existing is enough for Black women without the added burden of taking care of everyone else.



No matter how much others might study, learn, or write about what it is like to be Black or what it is like to be a woman in this country, the experience of Black women can only truly be captured by those who live in the Black female body. As bell hooks points out, Black women have lived experiences within the racist patriarchy that cannot make us a simple object of study for feminism (or Black studies); instead, the experiences of Black women offer an additional vantage point. This vantage point can be applied to the works of several authors and creators who attempt to capture the voices of marginalized groups from an outside perspective. With that said, my analysis of Lisa Tessman's *Burdened Virtues* offers my additional point of view as a Black woman.¹ I will be using Tessman's concept of servility as the foundation for my proposal on balancing the demands of Black womanhood while also creating a life for oneself. The inspiration for this argument stems from not only my lived experience as a Black woman in America, but also as the daughter of a Black woman and a witness to the culture of the Black community. While the root of my argument comes from an understanding of oppression, the purpose goes far beyond the boundaries that oppression has created for Black women in society. The point of this piece is to examine what balance looks like for Black women in communities that demand so much from them.

To first understand what oppression looks like for Black women, I want us to consider the work of bell hooks.² The general notion of oppression is described by hooks as an absence of choices. However, within this description, she acknowledges that most women (situated in the U.S.) do in fact have choices, so hooks leans towards the ideas of exploitation and discrimination to describe how women are treated in society. Exploitation refers to the idea that women are taken advantage of for what they offer to the world. Discrimination is the recognition and understanding of differences (in this case, between women and non-women).

Tessman offers that burdened virtues are traits typically considered vicious by others but are reevaluated as virtuous for oppressed people.³ Of course, this reevaluation accounts for the difficulty of possessing these virtues as an oppressed person; thus, this is the acknowledged "burden." Different oppressed people have

different relationships with their burdened virtues. For the scope of this paper, however, I look at Black women and our oppression as it relates to the burdened virtue of servility.

The concept of servility is used in Tessman's work in passing and is defined as a result of the internalization of stigmas and hierarchies for oppressed people.⁴ These stigmas are often related to gender, race, class, and other social groupings. When Tessman refers to servility in her writing, it is in comparison to Thomas Hill's claim that servility is a vice. However, Tessman speaks on servility for women being a result of their oppression. She continues to explain servility as an experience in which the emphasis on the self is considered less worthy by an individual because of their expectation to serve others. Tessman states, "... one may be required to exhibit what appears to be servile behavior, without having the accompanying beliefs that would qualify one as having a character trait of servility."⁵ This idea is continued as Tessman explains that many women only consider themselves good and valuable if they are able to care for others. Unfortunately, this mindset leads to a pattern of self-sacrifice, and this self-sacrifice is a direct cause of the imbalance between other and self-regarding virtues.

Specifically, servility in women is an other-regarding virtue. An other-regarding virtue is a virtue that serves other people as well as yourself. So, for women, servility is an other-regarding virtue that describes what they are expected to do for those around them. This may include taking care of the household, upholding men, and fostering a nurturing environment. The burden of this virtue is that servility is engrained in the woman's role. Other other-regarding virtues could, in theory, stop being done, but servility is a constant state of being for women. Servility is not a vice because it is not the intention of women to lean towards servility. Because oppressed people, as a consequence of their oppression, are forced by society to prioritize their other-regarding virtues, the eagerness to label servility as a vice diminishes. In Tessman's interpretation of burdened virtues, we understand that the oppressed have a different relationship with virtues.⁶ Servility is a virtuous act for women, and it helps several others. With that said, the burden of servility on women makes their relationship with their self-regarding virtues complicated. The difference between self-regarding virtues and other-regarding virtues involves whom

1 Lisa Tessman, *Burdened Virtues: Virtue Ethics for Liberatory Struggles* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

2 bell hooks, "Black Women: Shaping Feminist Theory" in *Feminist Theory: A Philosophical Anthology*, ed. Anne Cudd and Robin Andreasen (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2005), 60-8.

3 Tessman, *Burdened Virtues*, 4.

4 Tessman, *Burdened Virtues*, 66.

5 Tessman, *Burdened Virtues*, 66.

6 Tessman, *Burdened Virtues*, 35.



you are interacting with. Self-regarding virtues are virtues that relate to the self, meaning that the effects of the virtue lead to a benefit of the self and self alone. On the other end of that spectrum, other-regarding virtues lead to the benefit of others. When we put this into play with women's other-regarding virtue of servility, it is assumed then that servility is not "wrong" or "bad" for women, just burdened. However, not all other-regarding burdened virtues require a sacrifice of a self-regarding virtue, so the issue that comes into play is how this happens for women. The requirements of servility in women are so extensive that they interfere with their self-regarding virtues. As stated before, the burden of servility is the constant pressure that women have from others to put their homes, children, and families (the world) before themselves. While this helps everyone in the women's life, it leaves very little space, energy, and time for women to pour into themselves. The balance between self-regarding virtues and other-regarding virtues is important for having a good life. While other-regarding virtues are important, if they prevent one from having self-regarding virtues then there is a character imbalance. Other-regarding virtues are ethical, but not beneficial for the oppressed. Self-regarding virtues are beneficial, but not necessarily ethical. The importance of this balance is that we need both. Otherwise, we run the risk of not having all that we need for a good life. Oppressed people do not have the privilege to put their self-beneficial virtues above their morally right ones. So, servility (being an other-regarding virtue that is ethically okay and good for others) is not always beneficial for the self. This absence of self-regarding virtues prohibits women from truly living well.

As mentioned before, my goal is to identify how servility affects Black women. It is important to address that there are many similarities between Black women and other marginalized groups of women; however, my analysis only focuses on the distinction between Black women and White women. As hooks describes, let us consider Black women not only as a part of the category of "women" but also as Black bodies that were previously owned. There is an added historical sense of lack of autonomy. Then, we can think about the 1900s Black woman being the upholder of the Black household: the stereotyped "mammy" that depicts a Black woman who is extremely motherlike, or even the idea of the Black matriarch "holding it down" for her family as we would say today. Even in the contemporary Black family unit, Black women are the "glue" of their familial communities. These are just stereotypes

of Black women, first created in a society of whiteness but also upheld in Black communities to this day. These stereotypes lead to expectations for Black women to play into their roles, which leads to exploitation. The exploitation of the role Black women play is the burdened virtue of servility, and the servility of Black women holds up the Black family unit. When Black women put everyone before themselves, they do this for their community's sake. This is why this analysis of servility heavily relies on the expectations of Black women within the family for comprehension of resistance.

Servility almost goes beyond the idea of an expectation and moves to a necessity. Black women must practice servility as a necessary part of the way the Black family is structured. If Black women were to give up on their virtue of servility in a pursuit of more self-regarding virtues, this would negatively impact not only themselves (and be ethically flawed) but also their communities. However, this necessity begins to translate into exploitation when the work done by women is not only taken for granted but expected beyond a reasonable amount. In this case, servility is the over-giving of Black women to those around them and the exploitation is the constant taking. Now we are led to the issue of servility and its effect on ethical balances of other, self-regarding virtues of Black women. Because we as Black women can not necessarily rid ourselves of servility, we have to find a way to resist it. Resistance acknowledges the near permanence of the situation created by servility while actively finding ways to work both around and within the structure. Attempting to change our relationship with servility can act as resistance for Black women. Resistance in this case should not be thought of as a performative or even an overly outward act done by Black women; instead, we should think about it as a way of pushing back against expectations in small ways.

For instance, while Tessman makes the relation between servility and sacrifice, I do not believe that servility should have to be linked with sacrifice directly.⁷ Yes, it requires selfless acts, but my proposition of resistance might challenge the idea that sacrifice has to be a necessary condition of servility. My goal here is not to give an account of how to get rid of servility for Black women; that is something that would have to be taken case-by-case. Instead, the goal is to explain why mastering existence in this space as a form of resistance will take away some of the burden of the virtue. By "existence" I mean the sense of liberatory consciousness, existing in a space of oppression with awareness without letting the awareness

7 Tessman, *Burdened Virtues*, 66.



consume oneself. While existence and resistance may seem like contradicting terms that cannot co-exist, there is power in existing as a way of resisting that makes the terms more alike than is first apparent. In other words, resistance takes many different forms. In a society that demands servility from Black women, the fight against these demands can look different for everyone. Instead of thinking of resistance as the only way to put a stop to something or to tell society what you are not going to do, existence can be a way to do it too. Existence is living in the discomfort of oppression with a consciousness that there are expectations that are inescapable but not letting those expectations dictate all actions.

Existence for a virtuous Black woman who exercises her servility means she does not let it consume her. Black women can be Black, a woman, a mother, and a caretaker while also being independent, strong-willed, and still partake in the joys of life. If we think about resisting servility as small pushbacks, we can also rationalize ways for servility and our self-regarding virtues to balance out. For instance, a small pushback would be abandoning the superwoman mentality and asking for help. Oftentimes, the reason why servility is so easily exploited is because many Black women do not like to seem weak, or in need of anyone else. However, asking for help and holding other people within your community accountable for the roles that they should play in a functional family can alleviate the burdens that are upheld by servility. The resistance to servility is not only about changing the relationship that Black women have with the virtue, but also about pushing back against their societal expectations.

Resistance qua existence is making space for ourselves when society tells us we should not have one. Resistance is changing the narrative of what it means to be a Black woman in a society that only acknowledges us for what we can do for others. With that said, resistance is also taking the sacrifice out of servility, lessening the burden, and creating a space for our self-regarding virtues to grow and develop without being stifled by societal pressures. Part of why people have gotten away with exploiting Black women for so long is because Black women have also believed the narratives that were created for them. Black women believed that they belonged in the house, or belonged to men, or needed to prioritize everyone but themselves. When I suggest taking existence and making that the power, it is about regaining our autonomy. Yes, servility is expected. However, if Black women have the virtue of servility because they are powerful women who can fulfill what they must

do and make time for themselves, then that is their autonomy. Power and autonomy are not interchangeable terms, but rather they are terms that feed off one another to make each stronger. The determination to gain autonomy is what makes Black women powerful—in this instance, existing as more than the role of the servile Black woman paves the way for autonomy. That is how Black women find power in the acts that they do.

While it may be difficult for anyone who is not a Black woman or has never had a close relationship with one to grasp how my ideas look in reality fully, I want to do my best to try. To set the scene for what I am suggesting, I want you as the reader to consider this context: imagine a little Black girl with an entire maternal history of caregivers. Her mom cared for her family, her mom's mom cared for her family, so on and so forth. Now, to offset some of that load she sees her mom carrying, she helps. This care for her mother is natural, not forced, because she sees what her mother has to go through and does not want to add to the burden. So instead, this young Black girl offers to help out: she folds some clothes, washes some dishes, and does this because she sees her mother do it. She keeps this up because the idea of helping her mom is rewarding and praised. Family members talk about what a “good girl” she is, and her parents consider her the perfect daughter. Everyone is operating as if the little Black girl chose to be a helping hand out of the kindness of her heart—until she stops choosing it.

When young Black women do not follow in the footsteps of their mothers, stop being interested in house upkeep, or decide that they would rather be outside with friends or boys, they are considered “fast,” disobedient, and disrespectful. This can be confusing for a young Black girl because while she was doing the right thing by being helpful, she will not realize that the help she had been giving for so long was a part of a bigger game of exploitation. So, instead of being able to go out, be young, and have fun like everyone else, the young Black girl is in the house helping—this time not because she wants to be, but because she has to be. Her mother does not sympathize because that is what every woman has done in their family as long as they have known, and no one cares or even realizes that the little Black girl gets added to the cycle.

This example that I am giving is the exploitation of servility at play and showcases the responsibility placed on Black women that is perpetuated through a cycle of expectations and exploitation. Yes, servility is a virtue, but the burden of it can do much more internal damage than anyone could predict. If we consider the



example above, but with the small pushbacks that I am suggesting, the cycle could be different. Instead of a cycle of women who put others before themselves and lack their own sense of identity outside of the family unit, there can be a cycle of Black women who create healthy boundaries for themselves. If the little Black girl saw a woman who took care of herself first, prioritized her health (both physical and mental), or took time away from the family every so often, then maybe she would not also be subjected to the stress of doing everything for everyone. This is what I mean by small pushbacks. I am not suggesting that Black women boycott their role in the home and leave it to their husbands or sons because I believe there is pride in having the virtue of servility. Instead, I am encouraging purposeful ways of removing servility from the forefront of Black women's lives and shifting the focus to self-serving activities and attitudes so that the cycle of exploitation does not continue.

I have given my account of existence as resistance as a way to live with servility; however, the opposition to my argument would say that existence is a form of giving in. This counterargument would combat the fact that we can accept servility and still strive for autonomy or freedom. Additionally, an objection to my argument might not see existence with servility as enough to be considered impactful for Black women. These would all be fair critiques. However, my argument is not meant to be directional. If doing away with servility were possible, there might have been a proposition for that already. My work does not strive to give concrete examples of how servility will be diminished or tamed; it instead focuses on the foundations of servility and uses that foundational knowledge to navigate our place in society. My goal in writing this is to add perspective to a concept that had not yet seen the view of a Black woman. This piece is a part of an ongoing attempt at countering oppression and oppressive practices with actions that bring joy and peace to Black women.

To address the idea that existence is a way of giving up: I would encourage the counterargument to consider the gray area between resistance and complacency. The counterargument aligns my view of existence as one of complacency when, in reality, existence is nothing of the sort. Existence is accepting the things we cannot change and navigating the world with that knowledge. My focus on existence as a concept requires readers not to think of it as doing nothing. To exist in society as a Black woman who is oppressed is enough. The need to defend the importance of my existence and the existence of people who look like me to a world that has already proven that they will not believe me is exhausting. That constant state of proving to other people that they cannot define Black women is just an extra burden. Instead, existence takes the role given to a Black woman by society and makes it mean so much more.



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