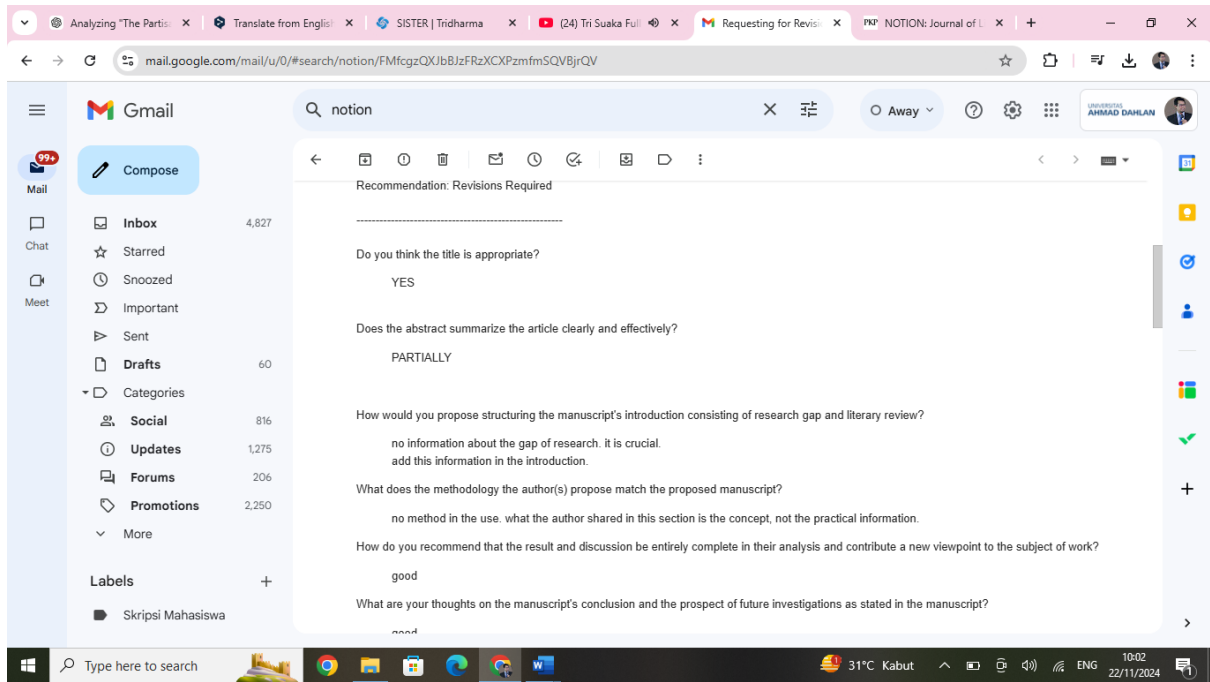
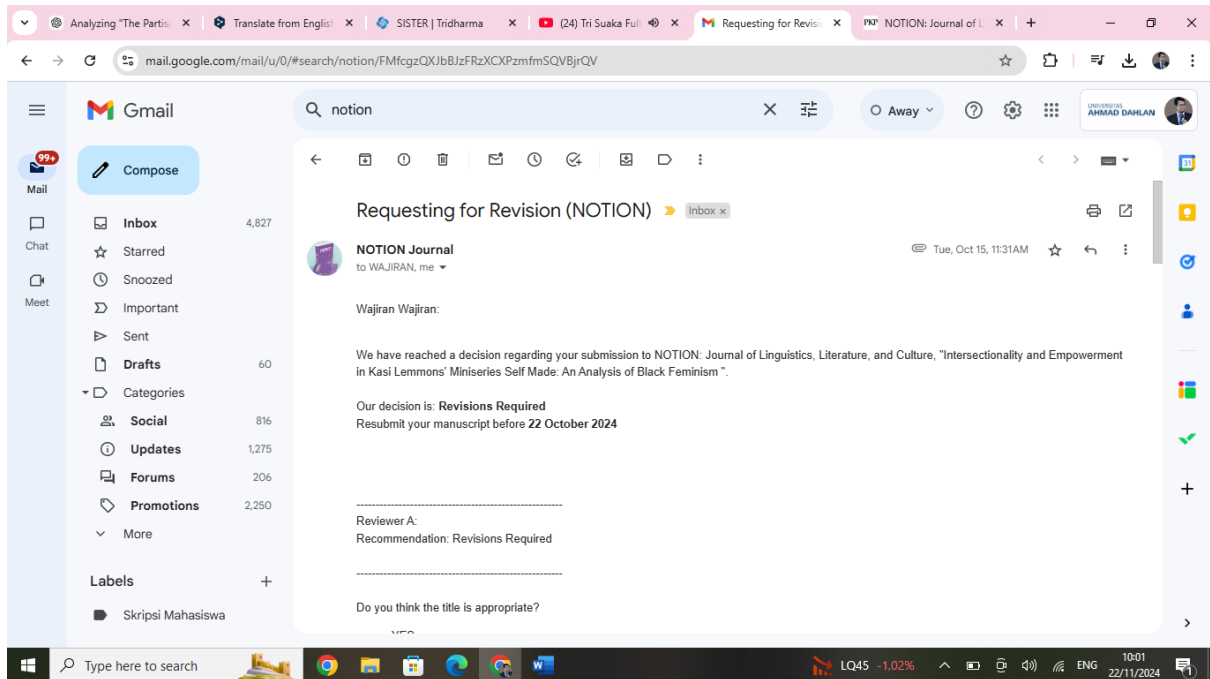


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Intersectionality and Empowerment in Kasi Lemmons' Miniseries *Self Made: An Analysis of Black Feminism*

Abstract

This paper examines the portrayal of Mrs. Sarah's entrepreneurial experience in the series. This research depicts black women's decision-making abilities, cross-racial identities, and women's empowerment through business ownership. Sarah's character represents Madam C.J. Walker dared to challenge the racial and gender boundaries in the early 20th century. Through the character Sarah, this series shows the tenacity and independence of black women and highlights the challenges women face as black women.

The series delivers a critical analysis of American society's beauty norms. Highlight the importance of Sarah's hair care products in advocating for Black women's personal and collective freedom. This depiction also indirectly questions limited beauty standards and respects various depictions of femininity. Director Lemmons pays tribute to black women's social and economic progress by placing Sarah's story within a larger historical and cultural framework. The *Self Made* series can be seen as a feminist work that highlights the importance of intersectionality, economic empowerment, and the reshaping of beauty ideals for Black people.

Key words: Black feminism; discrimination; intersectionality; beauty standards; Self Made; Sarah Breedlove.

Introduction

The Netflix miniseries *Self Made* is inspired by the life of Madam C.J. Walker and is directed by Kasi Lemmons. The miniseries was released on March 20, 2020, and has garnered praise for its portrayal of Madam C.J. Walker, an African-American businesswoman who became the first female millionaire entrepreneur. In the series, Madam C.J. Walker is depicted through a character named Sarah Breedlove. The show explores complex and diverse storylines and delves into concepts of black feminist theory. It touches on themes such as black women's empowerment, autonomy, the interconnectedness of different forms of oppression, the pursuit of economic independence, and the examination of societal norms surrounding beauty. *Self Made* pays homage to Walker's enduring influence and contributes to feminist discourse by offering a critical perspective (Nupus & Junaedi, 2023).

Sarah's depiction of experiences in *Self Made* highlights the independence of black women whose contributions are often overlooked. The character played by Octavia Spencer in the film demonstrates grit and determination while facing racial and gender barriers prevalent at the time. This portrayal is consistent with black feminist theory, which underscores the importance of strengthening the perspectives of black women facing structural oppression. Sarah (Walker) exemplifies an ethos of self-reliance and empowerment through business activities, which serves as a source of inspiration for future generations of black women (Abbar, Othman, & Waham, 2019).

The film explicitly addresses intersectionality, a foundational idea in Black feminist theory, by depicting Sarah's challenges and successes. Intersectionality, as conceptualized by

Crenshaw (1989), explores how different types of discrimination, such as racism, sexism, and classism, overlap and affect people differently (Crenshaw, 1989). *Self Made* depicts Sarah's struggles within a corporate environment dominated by white men and her relationships with black women in the hair care sector. This multifaceted portrayal offers a sophisticated understanding of the intricacies faced by Black women entrepreneurs.

The concept of economic empowerment is prominently featured in *Self Made*. This portrayal model exemplifies Sarah's efforts to build a path for herself and her fellow black women to achieve financial independence and success. Through the creation of a prosperous business empire, Sarah achieved economic independence and provided many jobs and leadership prospects for other black women. Thus Sarah was able to empower her fellow black women. This story aligns with feminist concepts that promote economic independence to combat gender and racial discrimination (A. Y. Davis, 1997). Through the character Sarah's legacy exemplifies how entrepreneurship can have a significant impact in promoting social and economic progress among disadvantaged groups.

In addition, the miniseries offers a critical analysis of cultural beauty norms that have systematically devalued black women's natural hair throughout history. Sarah's creation and marketing of hair care products is seen as an act that promotes personal and collective freedom. This effort challenges limited standards of beauty and encourages self-approval. This critique is fundamental in feminist discourse. It often examines the detrimental effects of Eurocentric beauty ideals on women of color (Mendrofa, 2020). *Self Made* contributes to a broader redefinition of femininity and empowerment by honoring diverse expressions of beauty.

Ultimately, *Self Made* is a feminist work that illuminates the complex challenges and successes experienced by Black women from multiple perspectives. The miniseries highlights Sarah's entrepreneurial career, focusing on individual initiative, the intersection of different social identities, financial empowerment, and the reshaping of societal ideals of beauty. These themes pay tribute to Walker's lasting impact and offer critical perspectives for modern feminist theory and practice. The narrative also displays her continued significance in the ongoing struggle for gender and racial equality.

Literature review

Black feminist theory provides an analytical framework for understanding the diverse experiences and obstacles faced by Black women at the convergence of race, gender and class. Prominent scholars, including Bell Hooks (1981) and Patricia Hill Collins (2000), have emphasized the importance of prioritizing Black women's perspectives and experiences in feminist discourse (Collins, 2000; Hooks, 1981). These theoretical frameworks highlight the ways in which different types of oppression, hindering and reinforcing, affect the realities that Black women experience differently from White women or Black men. The intersectionality paradigm, first introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, is crucial to understanding the multiple dimensions of discrimination and privilege (Crenshaw, 1989).

Self Made is an important work that supports black feminist theory by emphasizing the empowerment of black women. The depiction of Walker's commercial odyssey through a

character named Sarah Breedlove emphasizes her persistence and determination in overcoming racial and gender barriers. This story aligns with the black feminist focus on independence and self-determination. As explored by Hooks (1981) and Collins (2000) (Collins, 2000; Hooks, 1981). Sarah epitomizes the grit and ingenuity of black women, defying historical and modern stereotypes that often overlook their achievements.

The series perfectly demonstrates the concept of intersectionality through the severe challenges Sarah faces in a socio-economic environment characterized by racism, misogyny, and classism. Intersectionality, as conceptualized by Crenshaw (1989), offers a theoretical framework for understanding how different types of oppression affect individuals differently. *Self Made* explores Sarah's corporate trials and encounters with fellow African-American women in the hair care sector. It provides insight into the complexities of a complicated and challenging journey.

The fundamental focus of *Self Made* is economic empowerment. This is illustrated by the struggles of the main character, Sarah, who seeks to build financial independence and prospects for her fellow black women. This concept is consistent with feminist beliefs that promote economic independence to overcome gender and racial discrimination (C. A. Davis, 1982) Through establishing a thriving business, Sarah achieved personal economic independence and provided many jobs for other black women. This picture shows that entrepreneurship can bring positive changes to the social and economic conditions of underprivileged communities.

The *Self Made* series also addresses the critique of conventional beauty norms. A topic that is prominent in feminist discussions. Throughout history, Eurocentric beauty ideals have neglected the natural hair of Black women. This has hurt the self-esteem and social acceptance of black people both amongst themselves and amongst white people. *Self Made* challenges limited and exclusive beauty standards by portraying Sarah's creation and promotion of hair care products as an act of individual and group emancipation. This critique is crucial to understanding the broader consequences of beauty standards on Black women's identity and empowerment. As such, the series promotes a reinvention of femininity that encourages inclusivity and self-acceptance by honoring different expressions of beauty.

Self Made can be a robust literature that can be used to explore key themes in black feminist thought. This series highlights Sarah's entrepreneurial path, emphasizing black women's self-reliance, economic empowerment, and a critique of cultural ideals of beauty. These themes pay tribute to Walker's enduring influence and offer critical perspectives for modern feminist thought and practice. The series contributes to ongoing discussions on gender and racial equality, demonstrating the importance of the black feminist perspective in understanding and confronting structural injustices.

Research method

This research focuses on the issues of discrimination in the miniseries *Self Made*. This miniseries aired on Netflix consists of four episodes, each of which raises various issues, especially related to discrimination faced by black people. The focus of this research is on the main character, Sarah Breedlove, who is a representation of Madam CJ Walkers. That is

because this miniseries is based on Mrs. Walkers' life history. Because the data in this study are expressive expressions that occur in the movie *Self Made*, the data are not quoted in detail with pages, but only expressions that are relevant to the issues being discussed.

The issues of discrimination experienced by the main character are analyzed using the black feminism approach. It is an approach to literature that views black people as a community that is considered inferior to the white community. In addition to the issue of race, black feminism also highlights the double discrimination that occurs in black women. They are discriminated against not only by white people but also by men from their group (Wajiran & Septiani, 2023).

The theory of black feminism used is the one initiated by Kimberle Crenshaw entitled "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,". This paper discusses the intersectionality of race and gender, specifically focusing on the experiences of Black women. The paper criticizes the limitations of feminist and civil rights movements in addressing the unique struggles faced by Black women. Crenshaw calls for a more inclusive and intersectional approach to feminism and public policy. The text highlights the challenges that Black women face in cases of discrimination, both in the workplace and within the Black community, due to a failure to recognize the intersectionality of their experiences.

Discussion

Synopsis of the movie

The story begins with a woman named Sarah Breedlove, who works as a housekeeper for a white man named Addie Munroe. While working as a maid, she only earned a meager wage. This wage was not enough to support her family. During her work, she also received bad treatment from her employer due to discriminatory treatment as a poor person as well as a black person. Ironically, while facing these severe problems, her life was made even more difficult by the attitude of her husband, who did not work and only drank. He is often rude to her. He also looked down on her as a woman.

One day, Sarah came to Addie, who worked as a hair growth seller. Sarah's hair loss due to stress from the burden of life could be improved with the hair growth cream sold by Addie. She expressed interest in helping him sell the product. She wanted to work as a hair growth cell. When Sarah expressed her desire, she was insulted because she did not deserve to be a salesperson. This is because she is a black person who, according to white people, does not need to present herself. After all, she is a black person who does not have the attractiveness of black people (38:35). Addie says the job that suits her is washing and preparing food, which is a job that is not difficult to do.

Despite Addie's rejection, Sarah secretly continued to sell the hair growth cream. She sold it to black people who lived in her neighborhood. The sales received a very positive response. Thanks to her persistence, Sarah could sell quite a lot of the hair growth cream. Unfortunately, her success did not get a positive response from Addie (36:25). The reason is that Sarah did not ask permission before selling her merchandise. She was accused of stealing Addie's goods.

It was not because of the lack of permission to sell the product but because Addie wanted to be independent of Sarah, who was only a washerwoman. As a white person, Addie Monrue thought that Sarah did not deserve to have a job as a cleaner. It was considered that it would worsen the quality of her products.

Receiving this unfair treatment, Sarah finally decided to make her hair growth cream. Sarah realized that she had a talent for business. This was realized after the merchandise in the form of hair growth cream was sold out quickly. She also ventured to learn how to make hair growth cream from Addie products. Although he was caught and scorned by Addie, he was still determined to develop his own business. Initially, he had offered cooperation to Addie, but it was rejected outright because of racism.

Sarah decided to make her hair growth cream, which she sold to people close to her. Sarah's sales method is still limited to black women. Interestingly, she cooperated with black people who wanted to work with her. Thanks to the help and support of her family, she was finally able to create a salon and sell hair growth cream successfully. She was able to rival her main competitor, Addie Munroe, who also had the same business.

Even though her business was already well established and she was getting good customer feedback, Sarah still needed help. The investors, mostly men, did not support Sarah's business. Sarah's proposal to expand the business was not treated positively because a woman owned the business. The investors only wanted to provide assistance or investment if her husband ran the business. They canceled their investment plans after the potential investors discovered that Sarah owned the business.

Sarah was not discouraged by the discriminatory treatment. After struggling in various ways, she finally convinced the community and investors that she could run the business well. She also received good support from the community, especially black people and some investors who began to open up that a woman could also do business.

Representation of Black Women's Agency

Self Made portrays Mrs. C.J. Walker (played by Octavia Spencer as Sarah) as a strong figure who defies racial and gender boundaries. This representation aligns with black feminist ideals, emphasizing women's agency and resilience. Sarah's story is not just about economic success but also about challenging societal norms and creating new opportunities for black women.

Sarah's character portrays determination and persistence in holding principles. Despite not having the support of those around her, she continues to act on the views she considers proper. She is persistent in fighting for her desire to establish a hair growth cream business. Despite being ridiculed and underestimated by others, she still believed in the success of her business. At the beginning of her pioneering work, she was taunted by Addie Monrue that she was not worthy to be the seller of the product. This view is because Sarah is a black woman who is considered unsuitable to be a seller of these products.

Meanwhile, despite not having the support of her closest confidant, her husband, she stuck to her guns and continued to run the business with her daughter. The husband's disapproval

indicates that there are interests between men and women in terms of roles in the family. Undeniably, not all men or husbands want their wives to be more advanced than themselves. This is a very relevant argument to the conditions of society both for the African community in general and for African Americans. This indicates that male power or dominance is still extreme among black people in the United States.

Sarah's aspiration to become a businesswoman was an advancement. At that time, women were generally only a complement to their husbands. If a woman worked, she could not exceed her husband's success. That is why a husband will generally limit women's activities or gait in the social context, including in running a business.

Besides the business conditions still experiencing ups and downs, CJ (Sarah's husband) has reminded Sarah to reduce her business capital so that their family finances remain stable. However, Sarah has strong principles, so businesses must be patient and optimistic. To produce success cannot be just a flash in the pan. "You do not just plant a seed and expect fruit the next day." (21:48).

Intersectionality

The series highlights the cross-racial struggles Sarah faces, including racism, sexism, and classism, by focusing on Sarah's struggle against the white-dominated and male-dominated business world and her conflicts with other Black women in the hair care industry. The series underscores the layers of oppression that black women face. This approach is crucial in feminist theory, which advocates an intersectional understanding of identity and discrimination.

Sarah received unfavorable treatment because she is a black woman. As reflected in the conversation between Sarah and Addie, she was the first starter in the hair growth cream business, and she mocked Sarah, who was starting a business in the same field.

"I got a hamper full of dirty laundry with your name on it." (minute 30:39). Addie spoke this sentence because Sarah worked for Addie as a laundry worker from the beginning. In addition, when Sarah started the business, she had the opportunity to expand it to another city. Although there was already a way to expand her business, she also faced challenges from her own husband, CJ Walker, who did not agree to follow the move to another city. When Sarah said, her own husband laughed at her dream of becoming a billionaire in the hair growth cream business. Well, I cannot argue with that. -Yeah (29:03). Her husband doesn't want to move to Indianapolis, where the prospects for Sarah's hair growth cream business are high. CJ said, "I ain't movin' to Indianapolis. I love you, but I ain't movin's." (28:52). CJ's expression is a disagreement with Sarah who dreams of expanding her business. It can be interpreted that CJ underestimates Sarah's ability because she is a woman. In addition, it could also be CJ's disagreement because she wants to be independent of Sarah, who is more successful than him.

Empowerment through Entrepreneurship

The journey of the main character, Sarah, illustrates how entrepreneurship can be a path to empowerment for marginalized women. By building a successful business, Sarah not only

gains financial independence but can also empower other black women by providing them with employment and leadership opportunities.

Self Made offers an in-depth exploration of empowerment through entrepreneurship. The extraordinary journey is portrayed by the main character, Sarah, who becomes America's first black female millionaire. This analysis explores how the series illustrates the transformative power of entrepreneurship, especially for marginalized communities, through various theoretical and empirical perspectives.

Sarah Breedlove's story exemplifies economic empowerment. A fundamental tenet of feminist theory that advocates for women's financial independence to achieve gender equality. By creating a successful line of hair care products customized for black women, Sarah gained financial independence and provided economic opportunities through employment and training for thousands of black women.

The series clearly illustrates how Sarah's business offers a form of economic agency to black women, allowing them to support their families and communities. This form of empowerment is essential in capitalist societies, where financial stability often translates into increased social and political influence. The business model built by Sarah provides an example for future generations of Black women entrepreneurs, illustrating the potential of entrepreneurship to drive systemic change.

Beyond the economic benefits, *Self Made* highlights the cultural and social empowerment achieved through Sarah's entrepreneurial endeavors. By marketing beauty products specifically aimed at Black women, Sarah challenges prevailing beauty standards and promotes a positive self-image among her customers. This cultural empowerment is crucial as it addresses internalized racism and a sense of inferiority fostered by dominant Eurocentric beauty ideals.

Sarah's insistence on using black women in her advertising and promotional materials helped normalize black beauty and pride. This act of cultural resistance is an essential aspect of her empowerment strategy, in line with black feminist theory emphasizing the importance of cultural representation and identity politics (Hooks, 1981).

The series also portrays entrepreneurship as a form of resistance to systemic oppression. Sarah's success in the beauty industry is portrayed as a resistance to the socio-economic barriers imposed by a racially segregated society. Her ability to navigate and ultimately overcome these barriers demonstrates the power of entrepreneurship as a tool for social justice and resistance.

Sarah's business practices, such as creating a sales force of black women who act as brand ambassadors and community leaders, further illustrate how entrepreneurship can foster community solidarity and collective improvement. This approach empowers individual women and strengthens the social fabric of African-American communities, contributing to broader efforts for racial equality and empowerment.

From a theoretical perspective, Sarah's entrepreneurial journey in *Self Made* can be analyzed through intersectionality, which examines how different forms of discrimination intersect and impact individuals. Sarah's experience as a Black female entrepreneur

encapsulates the intersectional nature of racial and gender oppression, and her success highlights the importance of overcoming these overlapping barriers.

Challenging Beauty Standards

The series also criticizes society's beauty standards, which have historically marginalized Black women's natural hair. Sarah's hair care products are portrayed as tools for personal and community liberation, allowing black women to embrace and enhance their natural beauty. The issue of beauty is one of the main themes in the series. The main character faces challenges to societal beauty standards that have historically marginalized black women.

Historically, beauty standards in the United States have been dominated by Eurocentric ideals that often devalue the natural features of black women. This can be seen particularly in their hair texture and skin color. These standards are perpetuated through media, advertising, and social practices, leading to the widespread internalization of these norms among women of color. This internalization often results in the use of harmful practices and products to conform to these ideals (Alemu, Due, Muir-Cochrane, Mwanri, & Ziersch, 2023).

The protagonist, Sarah, 's entrepreneurial success is rooted in her development of hair care products that specifically cater to the needs of black women. The products were revolutionary innovations because they met the physical needs of black hair and promoted pride and self-acceptance among black women. By creating and marketing products celebrating black beauty, Sarah challenged her time's prevailing Eurocentric beauty standards (Ingrid, 2022).

The series depicts Sarah's efforts to uplift black women through beauty culture as a form of social and economic empowerment. In her advertising campaigns, Sarah's insistence on using models with natural black hair is portrayed as a radical act that defies dominant beauty norms. This representation is in line with a black feminist perspective that views beauty culture as a site of oppression and resistance (Hooks, 1981).

Self Made has been praised for its nuanced portrayal of the complexities surrounding black beauty standards. The series highlights how Sarah's products and marketing strategies helped redefine beauty for black women, encouraging them to embrace their natural features. This narrative is crucial in understanding the broader implications of beauty standards on racial identity and self-esteem.

From a theoretical standpoint, the series' challenge to beauty standards can be examined through the lens of cultural hegemony, as described by Antonio Gramsci. Cultural hegemony refers to the domination of a culturally diverse society by a ruling class, which manipulates the culture of that beliefs, explanations, perceptions, and values so that the imposed worldview of the ruling class becomes the accepted cultural norm (Wajiran 2013). In this context, Sarah's beauty products represent a counter-hegemonic force that seeks to subvert dominant beauty ideals and promote alternative standards that validate black beauty.

The issues addressed in *Self Made* remain relevant today as the beauty industry grapples with inclusivity and representation. The series serves as a reminder of the ongoing struggle against narrow beauty standards and the importance of promoting diverse and inclusive representations of beauty. Walker's legacy, as depicted in the series, continues to inspire

contemporary movements that advocate for the acceptance and celebration of natural black beauty.

Cultural and Historical Context

Director Kasi Lemmons emphasizes the cultural and historical context of Walker's life through the main character, Sarah. It incorporates her story into a broader narrative of black women's struggles and achievements. This historical framing is crucial to understanding the systemic barriers women like Walker face and overcome.

Self Made is set in the early 20th century and offers a rich depiction of the cultural and historical landscape that shaped Sarah's life and achievements. Understanding this context is crucial to appreciating the series' narrative and broader implications.

The early 1900s was a time of significant social and economic transformation in the United States, especially for African Americans. This period is known as the nadir of American race relations. It was characterized by widespread racial segregation, disenfranchisement, and violence against black people (Ortega RP., 2023). The legacy of slavery, reinforced by Jim Crow laws, created systemic barriers that limited opportunities for African Americans in almost every aspect of life (Frances, L. & Grayson, Bennett, 2010).

Sarah's story unfolds against intense racial discrimination and limited economic opportunities. As a black woman, Sarah faced numerous obstacles due to her race and gender. Her achievements in this context highlight the extraordinary nature of her success and underscore the resilience and ingenuity required to overcome such systemic barriers.

One of the historically significant movements during this era was the Great Migration. This event was characterized by millions of African Americans moving from rural areas in the South to urban areas in the North and Midwest between 1916 and 1970. This migration was driven by the search for better economic opportunities and an escape from oppressive conditions in the South (Nakayama, 2024; Wilkerson, 2010). Sarah is described as migrating from the South to the North to establish her business in Indianapolis. It then emerged as a center of African-American culture and enterprise.

In the face of racial discrimination, African Americans established their businesses and institutions. This was done to foster a sense of community and economic independence. It was a form of resistance to the dominant economic structure that excluded them. Madam C.J. Walker's (Sarah) success as an entrepreneur in the beauty industry is a testament to the black community's spirit of independence and empowerment. Her business not only provided personal economic benefits but also created jobs for thousands of black women. It enabled them to achieve financial independence and improve their social status (Peiss, 1998).

The cultural beauty industry became a significant economic and social empowerment avenue for black women during this time. Beauty products and services offered Black women opportunities for entrepreneurship and professional advancement in the job market. In addition, beauty culture played an essential role in shaping the identity of African Americans and resistance to racist beauty standards. Sarah's products are essential in promoting pride in

black identity and appearance. It is an effort to challenge dominant norms that denigrate black beauty.

The miniseries also depicts the early period of the Harlem Renaissance, a cultural movement that celebrated African-American cultural expression and intellectual achievement. Although *Self Made* predates the height of the Harlem Renaissance, Walker's (Sarah's) life and work are part of a larger narrative of African-American cultural awakening and empowerment. Sarah's success story contributed to African Americans' growing sense of pride and possibility. These achievements laid the groundwork for future cultural and social movements.

Self Made vividly describes the cultural and historical context in which Mrs. C.J. Walker (through the main character, Sarah) lived and thrived. Her story is emblematic of the broader African-American struggle for economic independence, social justice, and cultural affirmation during difficult times. By placing Sarah's achievements in this context, the series honors her legacy and illuminates the lasting impact of her contributions to African-American history and culture.

Conclusion

The Netflix miniseries *Self Made* offers a compelling portrayal of Sarah's journey as a pioneering Black female entrepreneur. Through the lens of Black feminist theory, the series highlights the complex interplay of race, gender, and class oppression. Utilizing Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality, the series effectively illustrates how Sarah's success was achieved despite the systemic barriers of her time, showcasing the multifaceted nature of Black women's experiences.

Sarah's entrepreneurial success is a testament to the power of economic empowerment in achieving social mobility and independence for marginalized communities. By providing employment and leadership opportunities, Sarah's business transformed her life and uplifted countless Black women. Additionally, the series highlights how Sarah's products and marketing strategies actively challenged Eurocentric beauty standards, promoting a positive self-image among Black women.

Situated within the broader socio-economic and cultural context of early 20th century America, *Self Made* underscores the systemic barriers faced by African Americans and the significant role of the Great Migration in shaping their experiences. This narrative not only celebrates Sarah's success but also provides valuable insights into the broader struggles and triumphs of Black women.

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Intersectionality and Empowerment in Kasi Lemmons' Miniseries *Self Made*: An Analysis of Black Feminism

Abstract

This paper examines the portrayal of Mrs. Sarah's entrepreneurial experience in the series. This research depicts black women's decision-making abilities, cross-racial identities, and women's empowerment through business ownership. Sarah's character represents Madam C.J. Walker dared to challenge the racial and gender boundaries in the early 20th century. Through the character Sarah, this series shows the tenacity and independence of black women and highlights the challenges women face as black women.

The series delivers a critical analysis of American society's beauty norms. Highlight the importance of Sarah's hair care products in advocating for Black women's personal and collective freedom. This depiction also indirectly questions limited beauty standards and respects various depictions of femininity. Director Lemmons pays tribute to black women's social and economic progress by placing Sarah's story within a larger historical and cultural framework. The *Self Made* series can be seen as a feminist work that highlights the importance of intersectionality, economic empowerment, and the reshaping of beauty ideals for Black people.

Key words: Black feminism; discrimination; intersectionality; beauty standards; *Self Made*; Sarah Breedlove.

Introduction

The Netflix miniseries *Self Made* is inspired by the life of Madam C.J. Walker and is directed by Kasi Lemmons. The miniseries was released on March 20, 2020, and has garnered praise for its portrayal of Madam C.J. Walker, an African-American businesswoman who became the first female millionaire entrepreneur. In the series, Madam C.J. Walker is depicted through a character named Sarah Breedlove. The show explores complex and diverse storylines and delves into concepts of black feminist theory. It touches on themes such as black women's empowerment, autonomy, the interconnectedness of different forms of oppression, the pursuit of economic independence, and the examination of societal norms surrounding beauty. *Self Made* pays homage to Walker's enduring influence and contributes to feminist discourse by offering a critical perspective (Nupus & Junaedi, 2023).

Sarah's depiction of experiences in *Self Made* highlights the independence of black women whose contributions are often overlooked. The character played by Octavia Spencer in the film demonstrates grit and determination while facing racial and gender barriers prevalent at the time. This portrayal is consistent with black feminist theory, which underscores the importance of strengthening the perspectives of black women facing structural oppression. Sarah (Walker) exemplifies an ethos of self-reliance and empowerment through business activities, which serves as a source of inspiration for future generations of black women (Abbar, Othman, & Waham, 2019).

The film explicitly addresses intersectionality, a foundational idea in Black feminist theory, by depicting Sarah's challenges and successes. Intersectionality, as conceptualized by Crenshaw (1989), explores how different types of discrimination, such as racism, sexism, and classism, overlap and affect people differently (Crenshaw, 1989). *Self Made* depicts Sarah's struggles within a corporate environment dominated by white men and her relationships with black women in the hair care sector. This multifaceted portrayal offers a sophisticated understanding of the intricacies faced by Black women entrepreneurs.

The concept of economic empowerment is prominently featured in *Self Made*. This portrayal model exemplifies Sarah's efforts to build a path for herself and her fellow black women to achieve financial independence and success. Through the creation of a prosperous business empire, Sarah achieved economic independence and provided many jobs and leadership prospects for other black women. Thus Sarah was able to empower her fellow black women. This story aligns with feminist concepts that promote economic independence to combat gender and racial discrimination (A. Y. Davis, 1997). Through the character Sarah's legacy exemplifies how entrepreneurship can have a significant impact in promoting social and economic progress among disadvantaged groups.

In addition, the miniseries offers a critical analysis of cultural beauty norms that have systematically devalued black women's natural hair throughout history. Sarah's creation and marketing of hair care products is seen as an act that promotes personal and collective freedom. This effort challenges limited standards of beauty and encourages self-approval. This critique is fundamental in feminist discourse. It often examines the detrimental effects of Eurocentric beauty ideals on women of color (Mendrofa, 2020). *Self Made* contributes to a broader redefinition of femininity and empowerment by honoring diverse expressions of beauty.

Ultimately, *Self Made* is a feminist work that illuminates the complex challenges and successes experienced by Black women from multiple perspectives. The miniseries highlights Sarah's entrepreneurial career, focusing on individual initiative, the intersection of different social identities, financial empowerment, and the reshaping of societal ideals of beauty. These themes pay tribute to Walker's lasting impact and offer critical perspectives for modern feminist theory and practice. The narrative also displays her continued significance in the ongoing struggle for gender and racial equality.

Literature review

Black feminist theory provides an analytical framework for understanding the diverse experiences and obstacles faced by Black women at the convergence of race, gender and class. Prominent scholars, including Bell Hooks (1981) and Patricia Hill Collins (2000), have emphasized the importance of prioritizing Black women's perspectives and experiences in feminist discourse (Collins, 2000; Hooks, 1981). These theoretical frameworks highlight the ways in which different types of oppression, hindering and reinforcing, affect the realities that Black women experience differently from White women or Black men. The intersectionality paradigm, first introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, is crucial to understanding the multiple dimensions of discrimination and privilege (Crenshaw, 1989).

Self Made is an important work that supports black feminist theory by emphasizing the empowerment of black women. The depiction of Walker's commercial odyssey through a character named Sarah Breedlove emphasizes her persistence and determination in overcoming racial and gender barriers. This story aligns with the black feminist focus on independence and self-determination. As explored by Hooks (1981) and Collins (2000) (Collins, 2000; Hooks, 1981). Sarah epitomizes the grit and ingenuity of black women, defying historical and modern stereotypes that often overlook their achievements.

The series perfectly demonstrates the concept of intersectionality through the severe challenges Sarah faces in a socio-economic environment characterized by racism, misogyny, and classism. Intersectionality, as conceptualized by Crenshaw (1989), offers a theoretical framework for understanding how different types of oppression affect individuals differently. *Self Made* explores Sarah's corporate trials and encounters with fellow African-American women in the hair care sector. It provides insight into the complexities of a complicated and challenging journey.

The fundamental focus of *Self Made* is economic empowerment. This is illustrated by the struggles of the main character, Sarah, who seeks to build financial independence and prospects for her fellow black women. This concept is consistent with feminist beliefs that promote economic independence to overcome gender and racial discrimination (C. A. Davis, 1982) Through establishing a thriving business, Sarah achieved personal economic independence and provided many jobs for other black women. This picture shows that entrepreneurship can bring positive changes to the social and economic conditions of underprivileged communities.

The *Self Made* series also addresses the critique of conventional beauty norms. A topic that is prominent in feminist discussions. Throughout history, Eurocentric beauty ideals have neglected the natural hair of Black women. This has hurt the self-esteem and social acceptance of black people both amongst themselves and amongst white people. *Self Made* challenges limited and exclusive beauty standards by portraying Sarah's creation and promotion of hair care products as an act of individual and group emancipation. This critique is crucial to understanding the broader consequences of beauty standards on Black women's identity and empowerment. As such, the series promotes a reinvention of femininity that encourages inclusivity and self-acceptance by honoring different expressions of beauty.

Self Made can be a robust literature that can be used to explore key themes in black feminist thought. This series highlights Sarah's entrepreneurial path, emphasizing black women's self-reliance, economic empowerment, and a critique of cultural ideals of beauty. These themes pay tribute to Walker's enduring influence and offer critical perspectives for modern feminist thought and practice. The series contributes to ongoing discussions on gender and racial equality, demonstrating the importance of the black feminist perspective in understanding and confronting structural injustices.

Research method

This research focuses on the issues of discrimination in the miniseries *Self Made*. This miniseries aired on Netflix consists of four episodes, each of which raises various issues,

especially related to discrimination faced by black people. The focus of this research is on the main character, Sarah Breedlove, who is a representation of Madam CJ Walkers. That is because this miniseries is based on Mrs. Walkers' life history. Because the data in this study are expressive expressions that occur in the movie *Self Made*, the data are not quoted in detail with pages, but only expressions that are relevant to the issues being discussed.

The issues of discrimination experienced by the main character are analyzed using the black feminism approach. It is an approach to literature that views black people as a community that is considered inferior to the white community. In addition to the issue of race, black feminism also highlights the double discrimination that occurs in black women. They are discriminated against not only by white people but also by men from their group (Wajiran & Septiani, 2023).

The theory of black feminism used is the one initiated by Kemberle Crenshaw entitled "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,". This paper discusses the intersectionality of race and gender, specifically focusing on the experiences of Black women. The paper criticizes the limitations of feminist and civil rights movements in addressing the unique struggles faced by Black women. Crenshaw calls for a more inclusive and intersectional approach to feminism and public policy. The text highlights the challenges that Black women face in cases of discrimination, both in the workplace and within the Black community, due to a failure to recognize the intersectionality of their experiences.

Discussion

Synopsis of the movie

The story begins with a woman named Sarah Breedlove, who works as a housekeeper for a white man named Addie Munroe. While working as a maid, she only earned a meager wage. This wage was not enough to support her family. During her work, she also received bad treatment from her employer due to discriminatory treatment as a poor person as well as a black person. Ironically, while facing these severe problems, her life was made even more difficult by the attitude of her husband, who did not work and only drank. He is often rude to her. He also looked down on her as a woman.

One day, Sarah came to Addie, who worked as a hair growth seller. Sarah's hair loss due to stress from the burden of life could be improved with the hair growth cream sold by Addie. She expressed interest in helping him sell the product. She wanted to work as a hair growth cell. When Sarah expressed her desire, she was insulted because she did not deserve to be a salesperson. This is because she is a black person who, according to white people, does not need to present herself. After all, she is a black person who does not have the attractiveness of black people (38:35). Addie says the job that suits her is washing and preparing food, which is a job that is not difficult to do.

Despite Addie's rejection, Sarah secretly continued to sell the hair growth cream. She sold it to black people who lived in her neighborhood. The sales received a very positive response. Thanks to her persistence, Sarah could sell quite a lot of the hair growth cream. Unfortunately,

her success did not get a positive response from Addie (36:25). The reason is that Sarah did not ask permission before selling her merchandise. She was accused of stealing Addie's goods. It was not because of the lack of permission to sell the product but because Addie wanted to be independent of Sarah, who was only a washerwoman. As a white person, Addie Monroe thought that Sarah did not deserve to have a job as a cleaner. It was considered that it would worsen the quality of her products.

Receiving this unfair treatment, Sarah finally decided to make her hair growth cream. Sarah realized that she had a talent for business. This was realized after the merchandise in the form of hair growth cream was sold out quickly. She also ventured to learn how to make hair growth cream from Addie products. Although he was caught and scorned by Addie, he was still determined to develop his own business. Initially, he had offered cooperation to Addie, but it was rejected outright because of racism.

Sarah decided to make her hair growth cream, which she sold to people close to her. Sarah's sales method is still limited to black women. Interestingly, she cooperated with black people who wanted to work with her. Thanks to the help and support of her family, she was finally able to create a salon and sell hair growth cream successfully. She was able to rival her main competitor, Addie Monroe, who also had the same business.

Even though her business was already well established and she was getting good customer feedback, Sarah still needed help. The investors, mostly men, did not support Sarah's business. Sarah's proposal to expand the business was not treated positively because a woman owned the business. The investors only wanted to provide assistance or investment if her husband ran the business. They canceled their investment plans after the potential investors discovered that Sarah owned the business.

Sarah was not discouraged by the discriminatory treatment. After struggling in various ways, she finally convinced the community and investors that she could run the business well. She also received good support from the community, especially black people and some investors who began to open up that a woman could also do business.

Representation of Black Women's Agency

Self Made portrays Mrs. C.J. Walker (played by Octavia Spencer as Sarah) as a strong figure who defies racial and gender boundaries. This representation aligns with black feminist ideals, emphasizing women's agency and resilience. Sarah's story is not just about economic success but also about challenging societal norms and creating new opportunities for black women.

Sarah's character portrays determination and persistence in holding principles. Despite not having the support of those around her, she continues to act on the views she considers proper. She is persistent in fighting for her desire to establish a hair growth cream business. Despite being ridiculed and underestimated by others, she still believed in the success of her business. At the beginning of her pioneering work, she was taunted by Addie Monroe that she was not worthy to be the seller of the product. This view is because Sarah is a black woman who is considered unsuitable to be a seller of these products.

Meanwhile, despite not having the support of her closest confidant, her husband, she stuck to her guns and continued to run the business with her daughter. The husband's disapproval indicates that there are interests between men and women in terms of roles in the family. Undeniably, not all men or husbands want their wives to be more advanced than themselves. This is a very relevant argument to the conditions of society both for the African community in general and for African Americans. This indicates that male power or dominance is still extreme among black people in the United States.

Sarah's aspiration to become a businesswoman was an advancement. At that time, women were generally only a complement to their husbands. If a woman worked, she could not exceed her husband's success. That is why a husband will generally limit women's activities or gait in the social context, including in running a business.

Besides the business conditions still experiencing ups and downs, CJ (Sarah's husband) has reminded Sarah to reduce her business capital so that their family finances remain stable. However, Sarah has strong principles, so businesses must be patient and optimistic. To produce success cannot be just a flash in the pan. "You do not just plant a seed and expect fruit the next day." (21:48).

Intersectionality

The series highlights the cross-racial struggles Sarah faces, including racism, sexism, and classism, by focusing on Sarah's struggle against the white-dominated and male-dominated business world and her conflicts with other Black women in the hair care industry. The series underscores the layers of oppression that black women face. This approach is crucial in feminist theory, which advocates an intersectional understanding of identity and discrimination.

Sarah received unfavorable treatment because she is a black woman. As reflected in the conversation between Sarah and Addie, she was the first starter in the hair growth cream business, and she mocked Sarah, who was starting a business in the same field.

"I got a hamper full of dirty laundry with your name on it." (minute 30:39). Addie spoke this sentence because Sarah worked for Addie as a laundry worker from the beginning. In addition, when Sarah started the business, she had the opportunity to expand it to another city. Although there was already a way to expand her business, she also faced challenges from her own husband, CJ Walker, who did not agree to follow the move to another city. When Sarah said, her own husband laughed at her dream of becoming a billionaire in the hair growth cream business. Well, I cannot argue with that. -Yeah (29:03). Her husband doesn't want to move to Indianapolis, where the prospects for Sarah's hair growth cream business are high. CJ said, "I ain't movin' to Indianapolis. I love you, but I ain't movin's." (28:52). CJ's expression is a disagreement with Sarah who dreams of expanding her business. It can be interpreted that CJ underestimates Sarah's ability because she is a woman. In addition, it could also be CJ's disagreement because she wants to be independent of Sarah, who is more successful than him.

Empowerment through Entrepreneurship

The journey of the main character, Sarah, illustrates how entrepreneurship can be a path to empowerment for marginalized women. By building a successful business, Sarah not only gains financial independence but can also empower other black women by providing them with employment and leadership opportunities.

Self Made offers an in-depth exploration of empowerment through entrepreneurship. The extraordinary journey is portrayed by the main character, Sarah, who becomes America's first black female millionaire. This analysis explores how the series illustrates the transformative power of entrepreneurship, especially for marginalized communities, through various theoretical and empirical perspectives.

Sarah Breedlove's story exemplifies economic empowerment. A fundamental tenet of feminist theory that advocates for women's financial independence to achieve gender equality. By creating a successful line of hair care products customized for black women, Sarah gained financial independence and provided economic opportunities through employment and training for thousands of black women.

The series clearly illustrates how Sarah's business offers a form of economic agency to black women, allowing them to support their families and communities. This form of empowerment is essential in capitalist societies, where financial stability often translates into increased social and political influence. The business model built by Sarah provides an example for future generations of Black women entrepreneurs, illustrating the potential of entrepreneurship to drive systemic change.

Beyond the economic benefits, *Self Made* highlights the cultural and social empowerment achieved through Sarah's entrepreneurial endeavors. By marketing beauty products specifically aimed at Black women, Sarah challenges prevailing beauty standards and promotes a positive self-image among her customers. This cultural empowerment is crucial as it addresses internalized racism and a sense of inferiority fostered by dominant Eurocentric beauty ideals.

Sarah's insistence on using black women in her advertising and promotional materials helped normalize black beauty and pride. This act of cultural resistance is an essential aspect of her empowerment strategy, in line with black feminist theory emphasizing the importance of cultural representation and identity politics (Hooks, 1981).

The series also portrays entrepreneurship as a form of resistance to systemic oppression. Sarah's success in the beauty industry is portrayed as a resistance to the socio-economic barriers imposed by a racially segregated society. Her ability to navigate and ultimately overcome these barriers demonstrates the power of entrepreneurship as a tool for social justice and resistance.

Sarah's business practices, such as creating a sales force of black women who act as brand ambassadors and community leaders, further illustrate how entrepreneurship can foster community solidarity and collective improvement. This approach empowers individual women and strengthens the social fabric of African-American communities, contributing to broader efforts for racial equality and empowerment.

From a theoretical perspective, Sarah's entrepreneurial journey in *Self Made* can be analyzed through intersectionality, which examines how different forms of discrimination intersect and impact individuals. Sarah's experience as a Black female entrepreneur encapsulates the intersectional nature of racial and gender oppression, and her success highlights the importance of overcoming these overlapping barriers.

Challenging Beauty Standards

The series also criticizes society's beauty standards, which have historically marginalized Black women's natural hair. Sarah's hair care products are portrayed as tools for personal and community liberation, allowing black women to embrace and enhance their natural beauty. The issue of beauty is one of the main themes in the series. The main character faces challenges to societal beauty standards that have historically marginalized black women.

Historically, beauty standards in the United States have been dominated by Eurocentric ideals that often devalue the natural features of black women. This can be seen particularly in their hair texture and skin color. These standards are perpetuated through media, advertising, and social practices, leading to the widespread internalization of these norms among women of color. This internalization often results in the use of harmful practices and products to conform to these ideals (Alemu, Due, Muir-Cochrane, Mwanri, & Ziersch, 2023).

The protagonist, Sarah, 's entrepreneurial success is rooted in her development of hair care products that specifically cater to the needs of black women. The products were revolutionary innovations because they met the physical needs of black hair and promoted pride and self-acceptance among black women. By creating and marketing products celebrating black beauty, Sarah challenged her time's prevailing Eurocentric beauty standards (Ingrid, 2022).

The series depicts Sarah's efforts to uplift black women through beauty culture as a form of social and economic empowerment. In her advertising campaigns, Sarah's insistence on using models with natural black hair is portrayed as a radical act that defies dominant beauty norms. This representation is in line with a black feminist perspective that views beauty culture as a site of oppression and resistance (Hooks, 1981).

Self Made has been praised for its nuanced portrayal of the complexities surrounding black beauty standards. The series highlights how Sarah's products and marketing strategies helped redefine beauty for black women, encouraging them to embrace their natural features. This narrative is crucial in understanding the broader implications of beauty standards on racial identity and self-esteem.

From a theoretical standpoint, the series' challenge to beauty standards can be examined through the lens of cultural hegemony, as described by Antonio Gramsci. Cultural hegemony refers to the domination of a culturally diverse society by a ruling class, which manipulates the culture of that beliefs, explanations, perceptions, and values so that the imposed worldview of the ruling class becomes the accepted cultural norm (Wajiran 2013). In this context, Sarah's beauty products represent a counter-hegemonic force that seeks to subvert dominant beauty ideals and promote alternative standards that validate black beauty.

The issues addressed in *Self Made* remain relevant today as the beauty industry grapples with inclusivity and representation. The series serves as a reminder of the ongoing struggle against narrow beauty standards and the importance of promoting diverse and inclusive representations of beauty. Walker's legacy, as depicted in the series, continues to inspire contemporary movements that advocate for the acceptance and celebration of natural black beauty.

Cultural and Historical Context

Director Kasi Lemmons emphasizes the cultural and historical context of Walker's life through the main character, Sarah. It incorporates her story into a broader narrative of black women's struggles and achievements. This historical framing is crucial to understanding the systemic barriers women like Walker face and overcome.

Self Made is set in the early 20th century and offers a rich depiction of the cultural and historical landscape that shaped Sarah's life and achievements. Understanding this context is crucial to appreciating the series' narrative and broader implications.

The early 1900s was a time of significant social and economic transformation in the United States, especially for African Americans. This period is known as the nadir of American race relations. It was characterized by widespread racial segregation, disenfranchisement, and violence against black people (Ortega RP., 2023). The legacy of slavery, reinforced by Jim Crow laws, created systemic barriers that limited opportunities for African Americans in almost every aspect of life (Frances, L. & Grayson, Bennett, 2010).

Sarah's story unfolds against intense racial discrimination and limited economic opportunities. As a black woman, Sarah faced numerous obstacles due to her race and gender. Her achievements in this context highlight the extraordinary nature of her success and underscore the resilience and ingenuity required to overcome such systemic barriers.

One of the historically significant movements during this era was the Great Migration. This event was characterized by millions of African Americans moving from rural areas in the South to urban areas in the North and Midwest between 1916 and 1970. This migration was driven by the search for better economic opportunities and an escape from oppressive conditions in the South (Nakayama, 2024; Wilkerson, 2010). Sarah is described as migrating from the South to the North to establish her business in Indianapolis. It then emerged as a center of African-American culture and enterprise.

In the face of racial discrimination, African Americans established their businesses and institutions. This was done to foster a sense of community and economic independence. It was a form of resistance to the dominant economic structure that excluded them. Madam C.J. Walker's (Sarah) success as an entrepreneur in the beauty industry is a testament to the black community's spirit of independence and empowerment. Her business not only provided personal economic benefits but also created jobs for thousands of black women. It enabled them to achieve financial independence and improve their social status (Peiss, 1998).

The cultural beauty industry became a significant economic and social empowerment avenue for black women during this time. Beauty products and services offered Black women

opportunities for entrepreneurship and professional advancement in the job market. In addition, beauty culture played an essential role in shaping the identity of African Americans and resistance to racist beauty standards. Sarah's products are essential in promoting pride in black identity and appearance. It is an effort to challenge dominant norms that denigrate black beauty.

The miniseries also depicts the early period of the Harlem Renaissance, a cultural movement that celebrated African-American cultural expression and intellectual achievement. Although *Self Made* predates the height of the Harlem Renaissance, Walker's (Sarah's) life and work are part of a larger narrative of African-American cultural awakening and empowerment. Sarah's success story contributed to African Americans' growing sense of pride and possibility. These achievements laid the groundwork for future cultural and social movements.

Self Made vividly describes the cultural and historical context in which Mrs. C.J. Walker (through the main character, Sarah) lived and thrived. Her story is emblematic of the broader African-American struggle for economic independence, social justice, and cultural affirmation during difficult times. By placing Sarah's achievements in this context, the series honors her legacy and illuminates the lasting impact of her contributions to African-American history and culture.

Conclusion

The Netflix miniseries *Self Made* offers a compelling portrayal of Sarah's journey as a pioneering Black female entrepreneur. Through the lens of Black feminist theory, the series highlights the complex interplay of race, gender, and class oppression. Utilizing Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality, the series effectively illustrates how Sarah's success was achieved despite the systemic barriers of her time, showcasing the multifaceted nature of Black women's experiences.

Sarah's entrepreneurial success is a testament to the power of economic empowerment in achieving social mobility and independence for marginalized communities. By providing employment and leadership opportunities, Sarah's business transformed her life and uplifted countless Black women. Additionally, the series highlights how Sarah's products and marketing strategies actively challenged Eurocentric beauty standards, promoting a positive self-image among Black women.

Situated within the broader socio-economic and cultural context of early 20th century America, *Self Made* underscores the systemic barriers faced by African Americans and the significant role of the Great Migration in shaping their experiences. This narrative not only celebrates Sarah's success but also provides valuable insights into the broader struggles and triumphs of Black women.

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Empowerment through entrepreneurship: An intersectional analysis of race, gender, and class in *Self Made*

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ABSTRACT

The miniseries *Self Made* depicts Black women's empowerment, intersectionality, and entrepreneurship. The study examines how the series depicts Sarah Breedlove's socio-economic hardships as she overcomes racial, gender, and class oppression to become America's first self-made Black female millionaire through qualitative analysis of key scenes and dialogues. The study uses Black feminist theory and intersectionality to show how Sarah's entrepreneurial career empowers Black women by questioning beauty norms and providing economic opportunity. Analysis shows how the series criticizes racism and misogyny while glorifying resistance and communal cohesion. The analysis also highlights the series' relevance to racial and gender equality discourse in capitalist economies. The study shows how cultural representations like *Self Made* may drive social change and help us comprehend Black female entrepreneurs' particular obstacles by focusing on their intersectional experiences. This research advances media studies, feminist theory, and African American cultural history by demonstrating entrepreneurship's transformative capacity to empower.



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I. INTRODUCTION

The Netflix miniseries *Self Made* is inspired by the life of Madam C.J. Walker and is directed by Kasi Lemmons. The miniseries was released on March 20, 2020, and has garnered praise for portraying Madam C.J. Walker, an African-American businesswoman who became the first female millionaire entrepreneur. In the series, Madam C.J. Walker is depicted through a character named Sarah Breedlove. The show explores complex and diverse storylines and delves into concepts of black feminist theory. It touches on themes such as black women's empowerment, autonomy, the interconnectedness of different forms of oppression, the pursuit of economic independence, and the examination of societal norms surrounding beauty. *Self Made* pays homage to Walker's enduring influence and contributes to feminist discourse by offering a critical perspective (Nupus & Junaedi, 2023).

Sarah's depiction of experiences in *Self Made* highlights the independence of black women whose contributions are often overlooked. The character played by Octavia Spencer in the film demonstrates grit and determination while facing racial and gender barriers prevalent at the time. This portrayal is consistent with black feminist theory, which underscores the importance of strengthening the perspectives of black women facing structural oppression. Sarah (Walker) exemplifies an ethos of self-reliance and empowerment through business activities, which serves as a source of inspiration for future generations of black women (Abbar et al., 2019; Wajiran, 2024).

The film explicitly addresses intersectionality, a foundational idea in Black feminist theory, by depicting Sarah's challenges and successes. Intersectionality, as conceptualized by Crenshaw (1989), explores how different types of discrimination, such as racism, sexism, and classism, overlap and affect people differently (Crenshaw, 1989). *Self Made* depicts Sarah's struggles within a corporate environment dominated by white men and her relationships with black women in the hair care sector. This multifaceted portrayal offers a sophisticated understanding of the intricacies faced by Black women entrepreneurs.

The concept of economic empowerment is prominently featured in *Self Made*. This portrayal model exemplifies Sarah's efforts to build a path for herself and her fellow black women to achieve financial independence and success. Through creating a prosperous business empire, Sarah achieved economic independence and provided many jobs and leadership prospects for other black women. Thus, Sarah was able to empower her fellow black women. This story aligns with feminist concepts that promote economic independence to combat gender and racial discrimination (A. Y. Davis, 1997). Through the character, Sarah's legacy exemplifies how entrepreneurship can significantly promote social and economic progress among disadvantaged groups.

In addition, the miniseries offers a critical analysis of cultural beauty norms that have systematically devalued black women's natural hair throughout history. Sarah's creation and marketing of hair care products is seen as an act that promotes personal and collective freedom. This effort challenges limited standards of beauty and encourages self-approval. This critique is fundamental in feminist discourse. It often examines the detrimental effects of Eurocentric beauty ideals on women of color (Mendrofa, 2020; Wajiran, 2024). *Self Made* contributes to a broader redefinition of femininity and empowerment by honoring diverse expressions of beauty.

Ultimately, *Self Made* is a feminist work that illuminates the complex challenges and successes experienced by Black women from multiple perspectives. The miniseries highlights Sarah's entrepreneurial career, focusing on individual initiative, the intersection of different social identities, financial empowerment, and the reshaping of societal ideals of beauty. These themes pay tribute to Walker's lasting impact and offer critical perspectives for modern feminist theory and practice. The narrative also displays her continued significance in the ongoing struggle for gender and racial equality.

Given the significant themes explored in *Self Made*, this paper must be written to contribute to the scholarly discourse on black women's empowerment, entrepreneurship, and the intersectional challenges they face. While *Self Made* has been praised for its portrayal of Madam C.J. Walker's legacy, there is a need for a deeper academic exploration of how the series contributes to black feminist theory, particularly in its depiction of entrepreneurship as a form of resistance against systemic oppression. By analyzing the miniseries through the lenses of intersectionality and cultural representation, this paper seeks to fill a gap in current literature regarding how popular media can serve as both a reflection of societal challenges and a tool for advocating change. This research will offer valuable insights into the intersections of race, gender, and class and demonstrate how cultural texts like *Self Made* can inspire new understandings of black women's empowerment and resilience in capitalist economies while challenging historical and contemporary beauty norms.

Black feminist theory provides an analytical framework for understanding Black women's diverse experiences and obstacles at the convergence of race, gender, and class. Prominent scholars, including Bell Hooks (1981) and Patricia Hill Collins (2000), have emphasized the importance of prioritizing Black women's perspectives and experiences in feminist discourse (Collins, 2000; Hooks, 1981). These theoretical frameworks highlight how different types of oppression, hindering and reinforcing, affect the realities that Black women experience differently from White women or Black men. The intersectionality paradigm, first introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, is crucial to understanding the multiple dimensions of discrimination and privilege (Crenshaw, 1989).

Self Made is an important work that supports black feminist theory by emphasizing the empowerment of black women. The depiction of Walker's commercial odyssey through a character named Sarah Breedlove emphasizes her persistence and determination in overcoming racial and gender barriers. This story aligns with the black feminist focus on independence and self-determination. As explored by Hooks (1981) and Collins (2000) (Collins, 2000; Hooks, 1981). Sarah epitomizes the grit and ingenuity of black women, defying historical and modern stereotypes that often overlook their achievements.

The series perfectly demonstrates the concept of intersectionality through the severe challenges Sarah faces in a socio-economic environment characterized by racism, misogyny, and classism. Intersectionality, as conceptualized by Crenshaw (1989), offers a theoretical framework for understanding how different types of oppression affect individuals differently. *Self Made* explores Sarah's corporate trials and encounters with fellow African-American women in the hair care sector. It provides insight into the complexities of a complicated and challenging journey.

The fundamental focus of *Self Made* is economic empowerment. This is illustrated by the struggles of the main character, Sarah, who seeks to build financial independence and prospects for her fellow black women. This concept is consistent with feminist beliefs that promote economic independence to overcome gender and racial discrimination (C. A. Davis, 1982). Through establishing a thriving business, Sarah achieved economic independence and provided many jobs for other black women. This picture shows that entrepreneurship can positively change underprivileged communities' social and economic conditions.

The *Self Made* series also addresses the critique of conventional beauty norms. A topic that is prominent in feminist discussions. Throughout history, Eurocentric beauty ideals have neglected the natural hair of Black women. This has hurt the self-esteem and social acceptance of black people both amongst themselves and amongst white people. *Self Made* challenges limited and exclusive beauty standards by portraying Sarah's creation and promotion of hair care products as an act of individual and group emancipation. This critique is crucial to understanding the broader consequences of beauty standards on Black women's identity and empowerment. As such, the series promotes a reinvention of femininity that encourages inclusivity and self-acceptance by honoring different expressions of beauty.

Self Made can be a robust literature that can be used to explore key themes in black feminist thought. This series highlights Sarah's entrepreneurial path, emphasizing black women's self-reliance, economic empowerment, and a critique of cultural ideals of beauty. These themes pay tribute to Walker's enduring influence and offer critical

perspectives for modern feminist thought and practice. The series contributes to ongoing discussions on gender and racial equality, demonstrating the importance of the black feminist perspective in understanding and confronting structural injustices.

While black feminist theory and intersectionality have been extensively explored by scholars such as Bell Hooks, Patricia Hill Collins, and Kimberlé Crenshaw, there remains a gap in the literature regarding portraying these concepts through popular media, particularly in the context of entrepreneurship and beauty standards. Existing scholarship has thoroughly analyzed the intersections of race, gender, and class in shaping black women's lived experiences. Yet, few studies focus on how these intersections are depicted in historical biopics like *Self Made*. This gap is particularly notable in discussions on how black women entrepreneurs, like Sarah Breedlove (Madam C.J. Walker), use business as resistance and empowerment. While *Self Made* emphasizes economic independence, self-determination, and a critique of Eurocentric beauty standards, there is limited academic exploration of how such media representations contribute to the broader discourse on black women's entrepreneurship and empowerment. This study addresses this gap by analyzing *Self Made* as a cultural text that portrays the intersectional struggles of black women in business and by examining its contribution to feminist and intersectional theories in the context of capitalist economies and beauty culture.

II. METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research approach, utilizing textual analysis to examine the representation of black women's empowerment and intersectionality in the miniseries *Self Made*. The primary focus is on understanding how the series portrays race, gender, and class struggles in the context of entrepreneurship. The method involves identifying key scenes, dialogues, and character interactions that reflect the socio-economic and cultural dynamics influencing the main character, Sarah Breedlove. This approach allows for a deep exploration of empowerment, resistance, beauty standards, and how these themes align with black feminist theory and intersectionality.

The data for this research consists of selected scenes, dialogues, and plot developments from the miniseries *Self Made*. The scenes were chosen based on their relevance to the study's objectives, such as instances where Sarah encounters racial or gender-based discrimination, her entrepreneurial journey, and moments that reflect her empowerment and the empowerment of other black women. Additionally, historical references, cultural symbols, and portrayals of beauty standards as depicted in the series will be analyzed. This qualitative data will be complemented by secondary sources, such as scholarly literature on black feminism, intersectionality, and African American cultural history, to provide a theoretical framework for interpretation.

The analysis method involves a thematic analysis of the collected data, focusing on recurring patterns and symbols related to race, gender, and class. Using the lens of intersectionality, the study will examine how these elements are intertwined and represented in Sarah Breedlove's story. A critical discourse analysis (CDA) is employed to deconstruct dialogues and narratives, revealing how power dynamics, oppression, and resistance are communicated. The findings will then be compared with existing black feminist scholarship to assess the series' contribution to the discourse on black women's empowerment, identity, and cultural resistance. This comprehensive approach aims to provide a nuanced understanding of how *Self-Made* reflects and challenges social structures by portraying the main character's journey.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The story begins with a woman named Sarah Breedlove, who works as a housekeeper for a white man named Addie Munroe. While working as a maid, she only earned a meager wage. This wage was not enough to support her family. During her work, she also received bad treatment from her employer due to discriminatory treatment as a poor person as well as a black person. Ironically, while facing these severe problems, her life was made even more difficult by the attitude of her husband, who did not work and only drank. He is often rude to her. He also looked down on her as a woman.

One day, Sarah came to Addie, who worked as a hair growth seller. Sarah's hair loss due to stress from the burden of life could be improved with the hair growth cream sold by Addie. She expressed interest in helping him sell the product. She wanted to work as a hair growth cell. When Sarah expressed her desire, she was insulted because she did not deserve to be a salesperson. This is because she is a black person who, according to white people, does not need to present herself. After all, she is a black person who does not have the attractiveness of black people (38:35). Addie says the job that suits her is washing and preparing food, which is a job that is not difficult to do.

Despite Addie's rejection, Sarah secretly continued to sell the hair growth cream. She sold it to black people who lived in her neighborhood. The sales received a very positive response. Thanks to her persistence, Sarah could sell quite a lot of the hair growth cream. Unfortunately, her success did not get a positive reaction from Addie (36:25). The reason is that Sarah needed to ask permission before selling her merchandise. She was accused of stealing Addie's goods. It was not because of the lack of authorization to sell the product but because Addie wanted to be independent of Sarah, who was only a washerwoman. As a white person, Addie Monroe thought that Sarah did not deserve to have a job as a cleaner. It was considered that it would worsen the quality of her products.

Receiving this unfair treatment, Sarah finally decided to make her hair growth cream. Sarah realized that she had a talent for business. This was discovered after the merchandise in the form of hair growth cream was sold out quickly. She also ventured to learn how to make hair growth cream from Addie products. Although he was caught and scorned by Addie, he was still determined to develop his own business. Initially, he had offered cooperation to Addie, but it was rejected outright because of racism.

Sarah decided to make her hair growth cream, which she sold to people close to her. Sarah's sales method is still limited to black women. Interestingly, she cooperated with black people who wanted to work with her. Thanks to the help and support of her family, she was finally able to create a salon and sell hair growth cream successfully. She was able to rival her main competitor, Addie Munroe, who also had the same business.

Even though her business was already well established and she was getting good customer feedback, Sarah still needed help. The investors, mostly men, did not support Sarah's business. Sarah's proposal to expand the business was not treated positively because a woman owned the business. The investors only wanted to provide assistance or investment if her husband ran the business. They canceled their investment plans after the potential investors discovered that Sarah owned the business.

Sarah was not discouraged by the discriminatory treatment. After struggling in various ways, she convinced the community and investors that she could run the business well. She also received good support from the community, especially black people and some investors who began to open up that a woman could also do business.

Representation of Black Women's Agency

Self Made portrays Mrs. C.J. Walker (played by Octavia Spencer as Sarah) as a strong figure who defies racial and gender boundaries. This representation aligns with black feminist ideals, emphasizing women's agency and resilience. Sarah's story is not just about economic success but also about challenging societal norms and creating new opportunities for black women.

Sarah's character portrays determination and persistence in holding principles. Despite not having the support of those around her, she continues to act on the views she considers proper. She is persistent in fighting for her desire to establish a hair growth cream business. Despite being ridiculed and underestimated by others, she still believed in the success of her business. At the beginning of her pioneering work, she was taunted by Addie Monrue that she was not worthy to be the seller of the product. This view is because Sarah is a black woman who is considered unsuitable to be a seller of these products.

Meanwhile, despite not having the support of her closest confidant, her husband, she stuck to her guns and continued to run the business with her daughter. The husband's disapproval indicates that there are interests between men and women in terms of roles in the family. Undeniably, not all men or husbands want their wives to be more advanced than themselves. This is a very relevant argument to the conditions of society both for the African community in general and for African Americans. This indicates that male power or dominance is still extreme among black people in the United States.

Sarah's aspiration to become a businesswoman was an advancement. At that time, women were generally only a complement to their husbands. If a woman worked, she could not exceed her husband's success. That is why a husband will typically limit women's activities or gait in the social context, including in running a business.

Besides the business conditions still experiencing ups and downs, CJ (Sarah's husband) has reminded Sarah to reduce her business capital so that their family finances remain stable. However, Sarah has strong principles, so businesses must be patient and optimistic. To produce success cannot be just a flash in the pan. "You do not just plant a seed and expect fruit the next day." (21:48).

Intersectionality

The series highlights the cross-racial struggles Sarah faces, including racism, sexism, and classism, by focusing on Sarah's fight against the white-dominated and male-dominated business world and her conflicts with other Black women in the hair care industry. The series underscores the layers of oppression that black women face. This approach is crucial in feminist theory, which advocates an intersectional understanding of identity and discrimination.

Sarah received unfavorable treatment because she was a black woman. As reflected in the conversation between Sarah and Addie, she was the first starter in the hair growth cream business, and she mocked Sarah, who was starting a business in the same field.

"I got a hamper full of dirty laundry with your name on it." (minute 30:39). Addie spoke this sentence because Sarah worked for Addie as a laundry worker from the beginning. In addition, when Sarah started the business, she had the opportunity to expand it to another city. Although there was already a way to expand her business, she also faced challenges from her husband, CJ Walker, who did not agree to follow the move to another city. When Sarah said, her husband laughed at her dream of becoming a billionaire in the hair growth cream business. Well, I cannot argue with that. -Yeah (29:03). Her husband doesn't want to move to Indianapolis, where the prospects for Sarah's hair growth cream business are high. CJ said, "I ain't movin' to Indianapolis. I love you, but I ain't movin's." (28:52). CJ's expression is a disagreement with Sarah, who dreams of

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expanding her business. It can be interpreted that CJ underestimates Sarah's ability because she is a woman. In addition, it could also be CJ's disagreement because she wants to be independent of Sarah, who is more successful than him.

Empowerment through Entrepreneurship

The journey of the main character, Sarah, illustrates how entrepreneurship can be a path to empowerment for marginalized women. By building a successful business, Sarah gains financial independence and can empower other black women by providing them with employment and leadership opportunities.

Self Made offers an in-depth exploration of empowerment through entrepreneurship. The extraordinary journey is portrayed by the main character, Sarah, who becomes America's first black female millionaire. This analysis explores how the series illustrates the transformative power of entrepreneurship, especially for marginalized communities, through various theoretical and empirical perspectives.

Sarah Breedlove's story exemplifies economic empowerment. A fundamental tenet of feminist theory that advocates for women's financial independence to achieve gender equality. By creating a successful line of hair care products customized for black women, Sarah gained financial independence and provided economic opportunities through employment and training for thousands of black women.

The series clearly illustrates how Sarah's business offers a form of economic agency to black women, allowing them to support their families and communities. This form of empowerment is essential in capitalist societies, where financial stability often translates into increased social and political influence. The business model built by Sarah provides an example for future generations of Black women entrepreneurs, illustrating the potential of entrepreneurship to drive systemic change.

Beyond the economic benefits, Self Made highlights the cultural and social empowerment achieved through Sarah's entrepreneurial endeavors. By marketing beauty products specifically aimed at Black women, Sarah challenges prevailing beauty standards and promotes a positive self-image among her customers. This cultural empowerment is crucial as it addresses internalized racism and a sense of inferiority fostered by dominant Eurocentric beauty ideals.

Sarah's insistence on using black women in her advertising and promotional materials helped normalize black beauty and pride. This act of cultural resistance is an essential aspect of her empowerment strategy, in line with black feminist theory emphasizing the importance of cultural representation and identity politics (Hooks, 1981).

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The series also portrays entrepreneurship as a form of resistance to systemic oppression. Sarah's success in the beauty industry is portrayed as a resistance to the socio-economic barriers imposed by a racially segregated society. Her ability to navigate and ultimately overcome these barriers demonstrates the power of entrepreneurship as a tool for social justice and resistance.

Sarah's business practices, such as creating a sales force of black women who act as brand ambassadors and community leaders, further illustrate how entrepreneurship can foster community solidarity and collective improvement. This approach empowers individual women and strengthens the social fabric of African-American communities, contributing to broader efforts for racial equality and empowerment.

From a theoretical perspective, Sarah's entrepreneurial journey in *Self Made* can be analyzed through intersectionality, which examines how different forms of discrimination intersect and impact individuals. Sarah's experience as a Black female entrepreneur encapsulates the intersectional nature of racial and gender oppression, and her success highlights the importance of overcoming these overlapping barriers.

Challenging Beauty Standards

The series also criticizes society's beauty standards, which have historically marginalized Black women's natural hair. Sarah's hair care products are portrayed as tools for personal and community liberation, allowing black women to embrace and enhance their natural beauty. The issue of beauty is one of the main themes in the series. The main character faces challenges to societal beauty standards that have historically marginalized black women.

Historically, beauty standards in the United States have been dominated by Eurocentric ideals that often devalue the natural features of black women. This can be seen particularly in their hair texture and skin color. These standards are perpetuated through media, advertising, and social practices, leading to the widespread internalization of these norms among women of color. This internalization often results in the use of harmful practices and products to conform to these ideals (Alemu et al., 2023).

The protagonist, Sarah, 's entrepreneurial success is rooted in her development of hair care products that specifically cater to the needs of black women. The products were revolutionary innovations because they met the physical demands of black hair and promoted pride and self-acceptance among black women. By creating and marketing products celebrating black beauty, Sarah challenged her time's prevailing Eurocentric beauty standards (Ingrid, 2022).

The series depicts Sarah's efforts to uplift black women through beauty culture as a form of social and economic empowerment. In her advertising campaigns, Sarah's

insistence on using models with natural black hair is portrayed as a radical act that defies dominant beauty norms. This representation is in line with a black feminist perspective that views beauty culture as a site of oppression and resistance (Hooks, 1981).

Self Made has been praised for its nuanced portrayal of the complexities surrounding black beauty standards. The series highlights how Sarah's products and marketing strategies helped redefine beauty for black women, encouraging them to embrace their natural features. This narrative is crucial in understanding the broader implications of beauty standards on racial identity and self-esteem.

From a theoretical standpoint, the series' challenge to beauty standards can be examined through the lens of cultural hegemony, as described by Antonio Gramsci. Cultural hegemony refers to the domination of a culturally diverse society by a ruling class, which manipulates the culture of that beliefs, explanations, perceptions, and values so that the imposed worldview of the ruling class becomes the accepted cultural norm (Wajiran, 2013). In this context, Sarah's beauty products represent a counter-hegemonic force that seeks to subvert dominant beauty ideals and promote alternative standards that validate black beauty.

The issues addressed in Self Made remain relevant today as the beauty industry grapples with inclusivity and representation. The series serves as a reminder of the ongoing struggle against narrow beauty standards and the importance of promoting diverse and inclusive representations of beauty. Walker's legacy, as depicted in the series, continues to inspire contemporary movements that advocate for the acceptance and celebration of natural black beauty.

Cultural and Historical Context

Director Kasi Lemmons emphasizes the cultural and historical context of Walker's life through the main character, Sarah. It incorporates her story into a broader narrative of black women's struggles and achievements. This historical framing is crucial to understanding the systemic barriers women like Walker face and overcome.

Self Made is set in the early 20th century and offers a rich depiction of the cultural and historical landscape that shaped Sarah's life and achievements. Understanding this context is crucial to appreciating the series' narrative and broader implications.

The early 1900s was a time of significant social and economic transformation in the United States, especially for African Americans. This period is known as the nadir of American race relations. It was characterized by widespread racial segregation, disenfranchisement, and violence against black people (Ortega RP., 2023). The legacy of

slavery, reinforced by Jim Crow laws, created systemic barriers that limited opportunities for African Americans in almost every aspect of life (Frances, L. & Grayson, Bennett, 2010).

Sarah's story unfolds against intense racial discrimination and limited economic opportunities. As a black woman, Sarah faced numerous obstacles due to her race and gender. Her achievements in this context highlight the extraordinary nature of her success and underscore the resilience and ingenuity required to overcome such systemic barriers.

One of the historically significant movements during this era was the Great Migration. This event was characterized by millions of African Americans moving from rural areas in the South to urban areas in the North and Midwest between 1916 and 1970. The search for better economic opportunities and an escape from oppressive conditions in the South drove this migration (Nakayama, 2024; Wilkerson, 2010) Sarah is migrating from the South to the North to establish her business in Indianapolis, which has since emerged as a center of African-American culture and enterprise.

In the face of racial discrimination, African Americans established their businesses and institutions. This was done to foster a sense of community and economic independence. It was a form of resistance to the dominant economic structure that excluded them. Madam C.J. Walker's (Sarah) success as an entrepreneur in the beauty industry is a testament to the black community's spirit of independence and empowerment. Her business provided personal economic benefits and created jobs for thousands of black women. It enabled them to achieve financial freedom and improve their social status (Peiss, 1998).

The cultural beauty industry became a significant economic and social empowerment avenue for black women during this time. Beauty products and services offered Black women opportunities for entrepreneurship and professional advancement in the job market. In addition, beauty culture played an essential role in shaping the identity of African Americans and resistance to racist beauty standards. Sarah's products are essential in promoting pride in black identity and appearance. It is an effort to challenge dominant norms that denigrate black beauty.

The miniseries also depicts the early period of the Harlem Renaissance, a cultural movement that celebrated African-American cultural expression and intellectual achievement. Although *Self Made* predates the height of the Harlem Renaissance, Walker's (Sarah's) life and work are part of a larger narrative of African-American cultural awakening and empowerment. Sarah's success story contributed to African Americans' growing sense of pride and possibility. These achievements laid the groundwork for future cultural and social movements.

Self Made vividly describes the cultural and historical context in which Mrs. C.J. Walker (through the main character, Sarah) lived and thrived. Her story is emblematic of the broader African-American struggle for economic independence, social justice, and cultural affirmation during difficult times. By placing Sarah's achievements in this context, the series honors her legacy and illuminates the lasting impact of her contributions to African-American history and culture.

IV. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the narrative of Sarah Breedlove, portrayed as Mrs. C.J. Walker, in *Self Made* illustrates the powerful intersection of race, gender, and class in her journey toward success. Despite facing systemic oppression from both white and black communities and enduring sexism even within her household, Sarah's resilience and entrepreneurial spirit allowed her to transcend societal limitations. Her rise to become the first self-made African-American female millionaire highlights her determination to challenge established norms, defy racist beauty standards, and provide black women with tools for empowerment—both economically and socially. The series emphasizes her success and her role in fostering pride in black beauty and creating economic opportunities for marginalized women.

The solution presented in Sarah's story lies in the importance of perseverance, self-belief, and community solidarity in overcoming structural barriers. Sarah's entrepreneurial approach, focusing on empowering black women through business and beauty, serves as a model for resisting societal limitations. By creating products tailored to the needs of her community and offering leadership roles to black women, Sarah established a legacy of empowerment that extended beyond personal financial gain. Her journey underscores the transformative power of entrepreneurship, particularly for marginalized groups, and continues to inspire movements for racial and gender equality today.

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