

BETWEEN THE LINES

Exhalin' Revisited: Does it hurt like Hell or can she count on "Us"?

By A. Asadullah Samad

For the second time in four years, black women are "exhalin'" in grand proportions. Hyperventilating is more like it. First the book, then the movie. Different mediums, same misguided focus. Black women and their relationships with black men, according to most women you talk to. Somehow, I didn't quite get that, out of the book or the movie. This is not a movie revue or anything like that. In fact, this is my annual Valentine's Day column (dedicated to my wife) to discuss relationships between brothas' and sistas'. But I'm not inclined to buy-in to "artistic" representations that distort our relationships, particularly to the detriment of one or the other. And to borrow one of the songs from the movie, "It hurts like Hell" to see brothas take the hit that they're taking. First and second time around. Why? Because the movie was more than that.

What I came away with was that the movie was about friendships and support systems these four women had (sometimes didn't have), about relationship choices that these women made (that were always not totally healthy), about how people, men and women, function in times of strifes and tribulation and the true character of people working through decisions they've made (not always the best decision) to heal themselves into a more secure and healthy state of mind. In fact, there were more of these issues than the so-called "men" issues. Men weren't even the central focus of the women's lives, but you would miss this if you get caught up in the different faces and places of the men in the movie. Men were by-products of these women primary focus, their careers. All except one, whose career was subordinated to her husbands, were trying to solidify their career/business niche. They all, except one, had issues with their families

— given their various phases of life. And yes, all had dysfunctional relationships with some of the men in the movie. However, almost in every instance, these sistas made decisions to participate in relationships that were less than what they themselves admitted that they wanted. Almost in every instance, their approach to men were almost mercenary.

One sista picked a man in a club, then turned to a married man. One was divorcing and in her hurt, took a mercenary approach to the guy she picked up (until she met one who soothed her hurt — something, by the way, her sista friends couldn't help her do). One found a decent brotha who wanted her but she didn't want him, played him until she could find Mr. Goodbar (all who were crack heads) but what she really needed to find was some self-esteem (which she found in the end). The last abstained (except for her ex-husband) by submerging herself in raising her son, working her business and eating. All put their emotional (and physical) needs ahead of their better judgment (and acceptable values), which we all have done at some time in our lives.

But to insinuate that their choices are reflective of the "slim pickins'" of quality black men is a gross misrepresentation. Clearly, there was something in these sistas' personalities (attitude and nature) that caused them to be attracted to brothas that we'll call "less than ready." Largely because these sistas were themselves "less than ready" (except maybe the divorcee) to receive the right man when he came along (which was demonstrated when fate delivered one good man at one sista's doorstep, well actually across the street but same thing). From the discussion I've had, this movie seems to have a greater appeal to the following demographic; Black woman, 35-

45, married late or not married at all. I've found (in my little informal survey) that women that married early or women that didn't come up in the "free love" era of the '70s and '80s couldn't relate as well, to what the sistas of our generation was dealing with.

The sistas' that came up in this period went through more brothas (for the wrong reasons) and had to wait longer to find what they wanted. "Waiting to Exhale" is about our generation and the choices we made is dealing with one another, and it went both ways. Yet nobody is viewing this from this perspective and "it hurts like heeelll" (as Aretha says), but of course, that's what makes the movie. But let's flip the script for a second. Being that this movie was set in the mid-1980's, brothas, I'd like to ask you two questions? Do you remember some of the sistas

you met in the '80s? I'm sure you held your breath on more than a few of 'em, right? Now, how many of them would you take home to meet your mom? The right one, right? My point exactly. Sistass (and brothas) wasn't always out front about what they wanted and many times, got as much as they brought to the table. If nobody brought anything of value, nobody got anything of value. If brothas made a movie of all the mismatched sistas they picked in '80s, we'd have sistas lookin' "real crazy." Bout as crazy as this movie made us look. Yet, I know plenty of good brothas that met plenty of good sistas during that time period. I met my wife in the '80s (1987). I didn't know she was going to be my wife but we became good professional friends. A friend I could eventually come to count on and eventually she could

come to count on me (that's also a song in the movie). I didn't see any of those relationships play out in the movie (even though it played out in the book — Bernie got with Wesley), which would have made the movie more wholesome and realistic. Of course, Hollywood is not going to rush to make Black men or black relationships look wholesome, so we have to do it ourselves. If sistas come right, there are brothas; as mates, as lovers (should you choose to go that way) and as friends that you can count on. And brothas have to be ready to receive to right sista. Otherwise, everybody "gets what get," and they all are sitting there holding their breath. And holding your breath, like a dog chasing his (or some) tail, makes you dizzy. Everything likes fun when you're dizzy, but reality sets in when the world stops spinning. The encounter



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(you can't call it a relationship) may serve the moment but it will be much less than they deserve. Not much to count on, much less build on. As we identify mates, go in ready for a compatible and complementary commitment. You breath a lot easier that way and don't have to wait to exhale. Count on it.

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Gambling on Poverty in America

By Bernice Powell Jackson

I do not consider myself a religious fundamentalist in any sense of that phrase. So I didn't understand the little nagging feeling of discomfort which was there as I began to think about gambling and whether I believe it is right or wrong.

I didn't understand what was bothering me until I read a recent article in Atlantic Monthly magazine which focused on Tunica County, MS, the poorest county in the poorest state in the country. You remember Tunica County—the place which Jesse Jackson brought to the nation's attention following his 1984 campaign.

The place he called "America's Ethiopia" and which had the eighth highest infant mortality rate in the nation, the fourth highest rate of births to teenaged mothers and the highest percentage of people living in poverty. The county where 70 percent of the adults had no high school diploma and a quarter of the houses had no indoor plumbing. Tunica County, where there are also 30 millionaires and few, if any, poor whites, while most African Americans are poor.

Well, Tunica County is changing. It's not changing because industry has moved there. It's changing because casino gambling has moved there. Mississippi has become a casino-friendly state, with the lowest tax rates on casino gambling in the country, much



Bernice Powell Jackson

lower licensing fees and a free market philosophy when it comes to regulation of casinos. Indeed, Tunica County now has half the casino floor space of Atlantic City and the casinos earn \$60 million a month.

There are good results from casino gambling in Tunica County, to be sure. The percentage of residents receiving food stamps has dropped and the collection of child support payments has increased. But the reality is that most of the casino jobs have gone to people from outside the county and the county's unemployment rate is comparable to what it was in 1991. The reality is that almost every white child in Tunica county attends private school and virtually every African American child attends the public schools and the county has been resistant to using casino generated funds to improve the public schools.

Or take the case of the Back Bay Mission, located in Biloxi, MS. Back Bay is a church-affiliated mission society which has ministered to the poor of

Biloxi for 70 years. With the onset of casino gambling, Back Bay Mission has seen its buildings, which were located next to the casinos, taken over by the city and razed in order to widen the streets for the casinos.

Or take the case of East St. Louis, IL, a city which is 98 percent African American and more than half of the population is officially unemployed. A city which has 3,000 abandoned buildings and where more than half of the children have elevated levels of lead poisoning. A city where the casinos generate something like \$500,000 a month for the city's tax coffers.

And what about gambling on native American reservations? For many of these reservations the casinos are the only employer of note for their people and casino-generated taxes allow the tribal councils to improve the reservations with

educational institutions and human service agencies.

It seems to me that the poorest of the poor have been forced to invite casino gambling into their communities in order to survive. It's the only business our poorest communities can find willing to invest in them. And while casinos have positive effects on communities, they have negative ones as well.

It seems to me that we as a nation need to address the question of how to develop jobs for the poor, the poorly educated, the victims of racism and economic injustice. Casino gambling should not be the only choice a community can make for life.

The question of casino gambling is a complex one, with no easy answers. But some of us need to begin to ask the questions and grapple with finding some solutions.

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