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Hypersexualized or Sexually Empowered: A Study of Hoshi Sato

Sex sells and the film industry lives to make profit, even at the expense of others.

Hollywood is problematic — in more ways than one — but the sexualization of ethnic groups is —dangerous. We can further examine this through Sylvia Wynter’s concept of “inner eyes”, which is unconscious perception by society. As seen in the recent Atlanta shooting, what is seen through society’s “inner eyes” holds power. The shooter sees Asian women as sexual objects, to fight his sex addiction, which we can partially attribute to the sexualization of Asian women in western media. In Star Trek, Asian actresses play recurring roles, such as Michelle Yeoh as Captain Georgiou and Linda Park as Hoshi Sato. The portrayal of Asian women is paradoxical, with Asian women characterized stereotypically but also given skills that define them beyond two-dimensional sexual objects. In *Star Trek: Enterprise*, linguist Hoshi Sato is one of the first recurring Asian female characters. Her characterization is complex; she holds stereotypical traits, yet holds onto her three-dimensionality as a character. Many, such as David Greven, believe that Sato is a caricature who plays into stereotypes about Asian women, going as far to say, “Hoshi unfortunately conforms to dragon-lady Asian-woman stereotypes, thereby undermining the effort to enlarge Hoshi’s role” and that because she is “Prone to fearful fits and generally seen as ineffectual in any terms other than the linguistic aspects of her job, Hoshi is the resident screamer” (123, 217). However, the question remains whether Hoshi is so two-dimensional that she only serves an aesthetic/sexual purpose in the franchise. Despite her hypersexualization and

stereotypical characterization, Hoshi Sato is a complex, multi-dimensional character who serves a purpose other than sexual appeal. Through Linda Park's own agency and interpretation of Sato and, Sato's hypersexualization can be utilized to redefine the perception of Asian American women through societal inner-eyes for the audience.

Throughout *Star Trek: Enterprise*, Hoshi is characterized as afraid, inexperienced, and often underestimated. She is new to space and lacks confidence, making her "younger" than her seasoned colleagues (Memory Alpha, Sato). However, this inexperience infantilizes her in contrast to her white counterparts, playing into orientalist stereotypes. Hoshi is perceived to be less competent, less useful, and less adequate by both her colleagues and viewers of Star Trek. This perception of her is especially apparent in *Silent Enemy*, when the crew is under attack by a foreign alien spaceship. In an urgent situation, rather than calling on Sato to help the rest of the crew install experimental phase cannons, Sato is asked to find out what Malcom Reed's favorite food is. Despite her protests, she is patronizingly told that it "requires delicacy" and "needs her finesse" (*Silent Enemy*). This pushes the idea that Asian women suit traditionally feminine, domestic roles, rather than the strong, career woman role that her white counterparts fill. Asian women are commonly stereotyped as innocent, unconfident, meek, and unassertive: characteristics we can find in Sato. This characterization evidently connects to Sato's character being criticized by Star Trek fans to be "ineffectual" (Greven, 127) and noted to have "not made an impact" (Jones, 375).

Stereotypical characterization of Asian women take form in two ways: either the innocent "Lotus Blossom" or the manipulative "Dragon Lady". Unfortunately, both portrayals are typically hypersexualized. Hoshi Sato is no exception to this, playing both stereotypes

throughout *Enterprise*. Sato generally plays an inexperienced and unassertive character, playing into the demeaning “lotus flower” caricature. According to critical race-theorist Celine Pereñez-Shimizu, “Even the lotus blossom is a femme fatale figure in killing herself and threatening to overwhelm the white man with her devotion and loyalty” (59). Sato is undeniably devoted and loyal to the crew and only has romantic altercations with white men such as Jonathan Archer and Malcom Reed in scenes. Contrarily, in the parallel universe, Mirror Sato is inarguably a “Dragon lady” caricature, shown to be morally depraved and manipulative through her manipulation of the white men on the crew and her morally gray actions. Because Sato is only characterized in these two ways, both stereotypical and demeaning, Star Trek’s writers undermine her impact and allow for the interpretation of her as simply a sexual object.

As with most portrayals of Asian women in Hollywood, Hoshi Sato’s body is hypersexualized through *Enterprise*, exacerbating the problematic and dangerous sexualization of Asian women. Sato is portrayed through the lens of a white male writer and audience and this is especially apparent with both her dress and actions. For example, in Shockwave I and II, where Sato plays a vital role in saving the crew, the ship has been taken over by an alien species and in order to save their captain, the crew of *Enterprise* must somehow free him by climbing through air vents. Sato is the only one “small enough”, another sign of her infantilization amongst her white female counterparts, and manages to free Malcom Reed, at the expense of losing her shirt. Writers of *Enterprise* chose to create an extra 5-6 seconds, for the sole purpose of Sato being topless, as if to try and sell the episode to their viewers. The scene holds an almost comedic effect, as she suddenly is topless for a very stupid reason: her shirt got caught on a hook. This scene achieved a purpose of objectifying Sato to the audience, showing her to simply

exist for the sex appeal of the episode. Similarly, in the Mirror Universe, after Sato dubs herself “Empress Sato”, not only does she wear black lingerie, but she also wears a modified version of the Starfleet uniform, cropped to reveal her midriff. Even her makeup takes on a more sultry, seductive look with increasingly dramatic eye makeup. All this further hypersexualizes Sato, especially in comparison to her white counterparts.

Her hypersexualization is further exacerbated in the mirror universe, Mirror-Sato serves a role called the “captain’s woman,” where she essentially just performs sexual favors for the captain. As the hands switch over, she once again seduces the next captain, maintaining the role of “captain’s woman.” Then, she proceeds to seduce another man into killing Archer, the current captain, and takes over the ship (*Into the Mirror Darkly II*). Mirror-Sato heavily plays into the “Dragon Lady” stereotype. Parreñas Shimizu describes the dragon lady caricature as using her “Oriental” femininity, associated with seduction and danger, to trap white men...” (Parreñas-Shimizu, 59). The negativity of “trapping” white men as well as seduction, forces the “Dragon Lady” to take on commonly antagonistic roles, while the inherent sexuality to her actions objectifies her. This is especially problematic when Mirror-Sato’s “excessively dangerous sexuality is a major emblem of her race and gender visibility” (Parreñas-Shimizu, 59). For Mirror Sato, the role of “captain’s woman” evidently objectifies her, as she somehow ‘belongs’ to the captain, while her morally gray actions of killing Jonathan Archer by poison make her an antagonist. Because she is the only Asian American woman on the cast, her actions are perceived to be representative of Asian women as a whole. We can further examine this through the concept of “inner eyes”. Wynter writes that inner eyes are “a shared mode of subjective understanding” with “which we look with our physical eyes upon reality” (Wynter, 44). Through

white America's "inner eyes", Asian women are connected heavily to sex and manipulation, which are both perceived negatively. In a book about the culture that Asian youth grow up around, Jennifer Lee and Min Zhou interviewed Asian-American actress, Ji who argued about a role that she had: "...it wasn't a very good representation of the Korean woman. It was one representation, but it wasn't a complete representation. And because Koreans, or Asians aren't seen very often on T.V., those rare cases when you do see their faces on T.V., that's how people are gonna judge us" (Ji quoted by Lee, 258). A negative single representation, a Dragon Lady, connotes exoticism, sexuality, and moral depravity for Asian American women. This holds danger for the Asian American woman, as she is boiled down to just her sexual appeal and utilization of a white male for her needs, showing her to be morally depraved.

Sato being sexualized by the script of Star Trek, forces her objectification by the male spectator. This portrayal of Sato as a sexual object can be seen in almost every YouTube clip she's in — most comments that mention Sato are about her breasts or attractiveness, rather than what she did in the episode. The audience of Star Trek views Sato, and by extension, Asian women, with an objectifying gaze, shown through feedback on almost any scene with Sato. For example, as Sato saves the crew of Enterprise and her shirt inadvertently gets caught, YouTube user, Joe Swanson comments "ME so HAWWWNEEE, ME LUV YOU LONG TIME!", a reference to a phrase said by a Vietnamese prostitute to American soldiers in an old American movie, *Full Metal Jacket*. Despite Sato's character being Japanese-American and not a prostitute, evidently, society holds onto problematic, in this case sexually demeaning, portrayals of Asian women and applies them to all Asian women. Problematic as it is, one could argue that this is simply a response to the character of Hoshi Sato. However, because of the low exposure to Asian

Americans, the inner eyes of society choose to generalize this to all Asian women, with other users commenting things like, “Gotta love cute asian women when they act innocent but they are really sexual” (User: soap fan), garnering 34 likes. The perception of Asian women as sexual objects, even when they play significant roles, shows that the writers of Star Trek have only exacerbated the objectification of Asian women by male spectators in writing in this scene for Sato.

This objectification further alienates Asian American women, pushing them into a categorical “other”. Even Linda Park notes, “Except for the Mirror Universe episodes, her personal scenes were usually isolated from the rest of the crew” (StarTrek.com). For example, in “Silent Enemy”, while the other crew members are trying to install cannons together, Sato is given a subtask to complete alone (Silent Enemy). In this case, Sato is not only given a task below her skillset, but she is separated from both her white female counterpart, but also the other people of color in the crew. Thus, we observe that the “other” status of Asian American women is created partially through a direct contrast with their white counterparts. As Pereñez Shimizu states, “Hypersexuality is essentialized to their race and gender ontology and it is constructed in direct relation to the innocence and moral superiority of white women.” (62) This is evident in the episode, “Two Days and Two Nights”, when the crewmembers of Enterprise touch down on the planet, Risa. Of the two women on board, Sato is the only woman to find a short-term romantic partner - an alien man. Societal standards stipulate that women should be “pure” and “virginal”, however, Sato’s character defies that. This is especially evident in contrast to her white counterpart, the white woman on the ship, T’Pol, who does not seek sex. Thus, her one-night stand separates Sato from the other characters, as she is the only woman of the crew

who was tempted into having sex. Sato's contrast from her white counterparts isolates her, marking her as sexually depraved and morally low and demonstrates the moral superiority of white women in contrast. As Hollywood has a problematic history of casting Asian American women as sex workers, Sato's character can easily be connected to this stereotype, especially in this episode. In other words, the exoticism and hyper sexualization of Asian women is constructed for the purpose of influencing societal perception through inner eyes and degrade Asian women in direct contrast to white women.

However, does hyper sexualization really mean that Hoshi Sato is a 2-dimensional character that we should write off? Although Sato is heavily sexualized, the actress' agency makes a difference. As seen through interviews with Linda Park, actress of Hoshi Sato, despite Sato being infantilized, Park interpreted it as, "I felt that everyone had a place on the clock, of what they contributed, in terms of human emotions, or some aspect of humanity, and mine was to really bring... the feeling of being a novice and not being sure of oneself..." (Park, 6:40-6:58). Park's agency is clearly being utilized to shift Sato away from being demeaned, but to rather fit with a more positive interpretation of why Star Trek writers chose to make Sato inexperienced. Rather than drag Sato's character, we can instead focus on the tenacity of Linda Park and the hidden intelligence of Sato.

Despite being seen through other characters' "inner eyes" as incompetent, Linda Park uses her agency as an actress to show that Sato is exasperated with this as well as her sexualization. For example, when she loses her shirt in "Shockwave", by scoffing and rolling her eyes while delivering her lines, Park is able to add a dimension of complexity to Sato. Sato is not simply a shirtless woman, but rather a woman who has emotions such as exasperation and

annoyance towards the difficult situation she is in. This agency allows for the redefinition and expansion of Sato's character, allowing her to express herself past the stereotype of "scantily clad Asian woman", but rather as a powerful woman who was caught in an uncomfortable position. This agency is often exercised by Asian actresses to combat the negative characterization their roles have. For example, actress Lucy Liu speaks on stereotypical roles as, "I get a few opportunities, and I try to make them as full and as three-dimensional as possible" (Liu quoted by Lee, 275). Although Liu is famous for acting a sexual Dragon lady, by adding emotions and characterization outside of what is simply written and who is stereotypical for her character, her characters are able to grow past two-dimensional caricatures. Because Hollywood movies are primarily written from the white cisgender-heterosexual perspective of the directors, Asian women are perceived to be sexual beings and thus are written hyper sexually. However, in order to change this perception, Asian American actresses can take on these roles, change how they are characterized, prove their marketability, and change how they are seen through societal inner eyes. Thus, rather than criticize the hyper sexualization of Sato, we can recognize that Linda Park was a rookie actress who had few opportunities, of which all were most likely hypersexualized. However, through her agency, Park is able to make Sato a more three-dimensional character.

Not only does Linda Park use her agency, but writers of Star Trek seemingly challenge this flawed perception of inner eyes by clearly showing Hoshi as a capable, intelligent, officer of Starfleet. For example, even in the first episode of Enterprise, "Broken Bow", Sato is vital to the success of the mission, translating what a Klingon was trying to say, making her the first human to understand Klingonese. Similarly, in "Fight or Flight", Sato's inexperience is contrasted with

her linguistic abilities, as she is able to overcome her fear of being drained by the Axanar and communicates with them, leading to cooperation with them. Despite other characters treating Sato like she's incompetent, she shows her skill and intelligence, which could be an intentional move on the part of Star Trek writers to defy how she is generally perceived.

Not only is Linda Park able to characterize and perceive Sato in a different way, but disidentification allows for Asian American viewers of *Star Trek: Enterprise* to reinterpret Hoshi as a meaningful character. The "conceptual other" status that results from being seen outside of the inner eyes causes Asian Americans to dissociate themselves from the portrayals they see in Hollywood. However, as writer Lisa Lowe argues, "Disidentification expresses a space in which alienations, in the cultural, political, and economic senses, can be rearticulated in oppositional forms... it allows for the exploration of alternative political and cultural subjectivities that emerge within the continuing effects of displacement" (Lowe, 103-105). Although these hypersexualized portrayals of Asian women are not accurate, Asian Americans are able to connect with them, simply because there are so few Asians in popular media. Simultaneously, because of this rejection of their portrayals, Asian American actresses, such as Linda Park, are able to explore different aspects of their characters as well as redefine themselves in the inner eyes. Thus, disidentification allows Asian Americans to reject stereotypes which allows for new portrayals to be formed, free of preexisting notions of how Asian Americans "ought" to be portrayed.

Although Sato is written to be intelligent, there is also the question of whether hypersexuality disqualifies Sato from being a "good" character. As Parrenas Shimizu argues, "If sexual representations not only represent trauma but also acts as sites for wrestling with power, resistance, and redemption, such an avenue must be explored for Asian/American women."

(Shimizu-Parrenas, 63) In a sense, Asian American women can redefine these sexual representations into a way that works for them. The only way to fight the perception of “inner eyes” is to change how the inner eyes look at Asian women, through showing the three-dimensionality of these characters. As Shimizu-Pereñez says most concisely, “Because the Asian woman cannot be imagined outside of sex, her resistance is also found in sex” (97). Thus, through this hyper sexualization, Asian women can be de-objectified and perceived through societal inner eyes. Although they are currently perceived as “others” and non-humans (more like sexual objects), through this box they are put in, they can show that despite their sexuality, they are complex human beings.

Asian American women are dangerously hypersexualized throughout America in part because of Hollywood. Famous films portraying Asian women in stereotypical, sexualized roles have created the perception, or the viewing from the “inner eyes” to be sexually deprived. However, we can then question whether these sexualized roles cause Asian American female characters to lack three-dimensionality, remaining as caricatures. Through the lense of Hoshi Sato, we can examine Star Trek’s stereotypical portrayal of Asian women and whether this contributes to the “conceptual other-ness” of Asian women. Hoshi Sato is almost paradoxical - shown to be more than a sexual figure but also perceived by both her crewmates and the society to be sexually objectified and demeaned. Although she is stereotypically characterized, her hyper sexualization combined with Linda Park’s agency hold power for redefining the perception of Asian Americans through societal inner-eyes. These hypersexualized portrayals hold power: power for changing societal “inner eyes”, even if it is through a demeaning portrayal and only through these representations can the Asian woman be imagined as more than sexual objects. As

evident in the recent Atlanta shooting, this existing perception, of two-dimensional Asian women, holds danger for all Asian women. However, because of her resistance through her hyper sexualization, the Asian woman can redefine herself to be imagined as both sex and more, fighting the two-dimensional characterization that she is given.

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