

# *Miss Purity Ring:*

Examining Sex Positivity Through a Young Womanist's Lens

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## *Table of Contents*

- *Introduction - pg 3*
- *Miss Purity Ring - pg 5*
- *Fast-Tailed Girls - pg 11*
- *Queens vs. Hoes - pg 14*
- *The Hoe Does Not Exist - pg 18*
- *You Played Yourself - pg 22*
- *The Thot vs. The Slut - pg 25*
- *Misogynist Mathematics: Body Count - pg 28*
  - *Threesome or Train? - pg 31*
  - *Where is her father? - pg 33*
- *Put Some Self on my Respect - pg 36*
- *Well, what were you wearing? - pg 38*
  - *Pick me! Pick me! - pg 42*
  - *Free yourself - pg 47*



# *Introduction*

Let's talk about sex.

No, really. Let's talk about sex but let's talk about it in a different perspective. Let's talk about it in terms of culturally. Let's get into the core of what sex positivity really means in today's society. I want to look at how sex positivity pans out through my own experiences as a young Womanist (or Black Feminist).

Sex positivity is the belief that one should not be shamed or judged for their sexual activity or for how they choose to express their sexuality. Sex positivity is the idea that sex is not taboo. It's not inherently good or bad. It just is and people should allow others to interpret it for themselves without shaming those whose relationship with sex differs from their own. It teaches people to understand that others have their own relationships with respect and we should respect each other's journey.

I was introduced to the idea of sex positivity through my journey of understanding Black feminism and Womanism. Through my findings and personal experience, I realized that sex positivity is vital for the liberation of women. At the core root of misogyny is the belief that women are simply objects; that our bodies do not belong to us but are for public use and consumption; that we're not human beings inherently worthy of respect unless we present ourselves in a "modest" way and even then, we still don't receive the respect we deserve.

When a woman takes control of her body, she's then chastised. If she exercises her agency against the grain of "modesty" then she's called all kinds of a "hoe" and "slut." This harmful beration fuels rape culture; a culture where actions, thoughts, and feelings normalize and excuse sexual assault which makes it hard for survivors to come forward about their assault.

Sex positivity fights against that. Sex positivity argues that women should be able to engage in sex however they want. If a woman wants to be “modest”, she can be. If a woman wants to be sexually active and show off her body, she has every right to do so. When we push the truth--that women are multi-faceted human beings who are worthy of respect regardless of fitting into “respectable”, patriarchal molds, we are slowly but surely breaking down the walls of sexism.

But let’s dig even deeper. What does sex positivity mean for Black women? How does sex positivity work when you complicate it with race? Why is it that when white women exercise their sexual agency, they’re marked as some sort of feminist revolutionary but when Beyoncé twerks, it’s “self-objectifying” and “anti-feminist?”

Sex positivity is vital for my Womanism\* and Black feminism because I feel that when we remove the idea that women, specifically Black women, are objects meant for consumption and that respect for us is contingent on how we present ourselves, we break down the foundation that misogyny, but contextually, misogynoir--anti-black misogyny--is founded upon.

This book contains a series of short essays I’ve written that capture what I have come to understand regarding sex positivity and how it relates to Black women and Womanism. Follow me as I examine sex positivity that is inevitably complicated when race becomes a factor.

\*Womanism is an ideology that focuses on how race, gender, and class impacts Black women. The term was coined by author Alice Walker in her book,



# Miss Purity Ring

"You have to wait until marriage."

I just stared at my mom blankly. She repeats herself, "You hear me? You have to wait until marriage to have sex. I know these little fast girls are running around having sex with whoever but you don't need to be doing that." I nodded.

Ever since puberty started knocking at my pubescent door, my super pious mother hammered into me that having premarital sex was a sin and unrighteous in the eyes of God. She told me that my virginity was precious and that I shouldn't just "give it away" to just anyone. The only person who can have my virginity, according to her and the Bible, was my husband. The only sex partner I should have, ever, in my life is my husband.

I never questioned that honestly. I just went with it. Being born into a sheltered, Christian household I never really got the chance to think for myself. All my morals and values were decided for me and laid all out in the Bible. My mom nagged me about waiting until marriage so much that, eventually, that was what I sought to do.

When I was around 15 years old, I decided that I would buy a purity ring. With my allowance money, I went to the Christian merchandise store and bought a silver purity ring that had "True love waits" etched along the band. I wore it proudly. My parents were very pleased with my decision to openly state that I was abstinent.

At school, my classmates would tease me about wearing a purity ring. "So you're waiting until marriage to have sex?" "Wow, so you're still a virgin?" "So does that mean no oral or anal?" I would just nod and brace myself for the incredulous responses I knew I would receive. Word got around school about my purity ring. Even my teachers knew. Some praised me and some found it humorous. From then on, I was no longer known as Candace. I was now "Purity Ring."

Initially, I wasn't bothered by it but as the jokes persisted, my annoyance grew. It was as if I was being reduced to my walk in abstinence and there was nothing more to me. When people would tell me that they were "proud" of me for waiting until marriage to have sex, in the back of my mind, it kinda fascinated me. Why were they proud? What was so special about me waiting? Why was it such a huge deal? What made me different from other girls, in particular, who were sexually active?

Even though I was being heralded for "saving" myself until marriage, it didn't change the fact that I'm human. Like any other growing teenager, I was hormonal. I was constantly thinking about sex. I was looking at boys in a different, more mature way. All these emotions were somewhat of a challenge to channel because I was taught that sex outside of marriage was a sin and any thought or feeling that was remotely sexual was not Christ-like.

My parents were open about sex. They were very honest with me about what sex was and how it affects people emotionally and physically. They were also realistic in thinking that there would be a slight possibility that I would choose to have premarital sex so they taught me about contraceptives. They taught me about keeping myself protected and safe. Don't get me wrong, that's awesome but while they're educating me about safe sex, my mother, in particular, is deciding what I should do with my body for me.

As I grew older, I began to grow more apathetic towards the whole "waiting for marriage" thing. I began to realize that hey... marriage is a long time away and I doubted my hormones would be able to take that. Instead, I decided if I wasn't going to wait until marriage to have sex, I would at least "lose" my virginity to someone I truly loved. That was the compromise I made with myself.

Then came college.



With college came temptation. I was free. I didn't have my parents riding my back, clocking what I was doing. At this point, I no longer wore my purity ring. I was so apathetic about it that I didn't even care to flaunt it anymore. Plus, I would've felt dishonest. I wasn't waiting until marriage anymore.

As my college career progressed, I began to come into what is now widely known as my Black feminist identity. I was introduced to Black Feminism and Womanism through social media but mostly Twitter. I began following Black feminists and Womanists on social media. Their thoughts about Black women, culture, and sexuality were so insightful to me. Insightful to the point that I began to identify as a Black feminist myself.

With becoming a Black feminist, my perspective on a lot of things changed, including my perspective on religion and spirituality. How drastically my views changed as a result of Black feminism could almost be another book or chapter of its own so, in short, I will say a lot of Christian ideals I once believed in, made me raise a brow now. These same ideals clashed with things I now believed in.

One of the main things I believed as a young Christian woman was virginity was this precious "gift" I had to "save" for someone special--that special someone being my husband. How could I not believe this right? My mom shoved this down my throat. I had no choice.

Although, in the Bible, this same expectation is extended to men, ultimately, this standard is held against women in reality. A man "saving" himself for his wife is a luxury. It's not an expectation people really have for him. I thought that was unfair. I also wondered, "Well, why is that?"

Unfortunately, we live in a world where a woman's morality is measured by shallow things such as her sexuality. Personally, I would cite abrahamic religious dogma as the source for such mentality. For many, the idea of chastity was introduced to them through religious texts. The Bible teaches that a person's purity is dependent upon their willingness to not "fall weak" to sexual temptation. As I've stated before,

what may have been meant to be a Biblical standard for both men and women, became something ultimately held against women.

Women are taught that they should be “modest” when it comes to their bodies. Cover up and close your legs is the mantra. If you’re “modest” that means you’re in moral good standing, you respect yourself, and others, but more importantly, men, are guaranteed to respect you supposedly. Do the opposite and you’re an abomination to yourself and all of mankind. If a woman is “modest” that means she’s inherently a “good woman” to most people because that’s what we’re socialized to believe. A woman who does not reveal it all to the world isn’t “tainted.”

From this idea of modesty, comes the social construct of virginity. Yes, you read it right. I did just say social construct. That’s what virginity is. A social construct. It’s something fabricated by society. Yes, there is a such thing as people who haven’t delved into any kind of sexual activity but the idea that they’re somehow more “pure” than others is a construct and it’s a toxic one at that.

When we hound into young girls that their virginity is something that’s supposedly “precious” and is only to be “taken” by someone worthwhile, we are already, inadvertently, teaching them that their bodies are solely meant to be consumed. We are subconsciously already instilling into them that their bodies are objects and sex is something that happens to them instead of something they actively engage in and enjoy. Yes, enjoy. Through this idea of modesty and virginity, we’re teaching young women that their bodies, including their sexuality, are something to be ashamed of.

Are you not buying this? Well, let’s just examine the language we use in regards to virginity.

“He ‘took’ my virginity.” “I ‘gave’ him my virginity.” Sex isn’t something that should be “taken.” A woman doesn’t “give” a part of herself away whenever she has sex. This kind of language hints to rape culture and we don’t even realize it because it’s so normalized. Sexual assault is about power. It is about denying one of agency of their body.

To imply that something is “taken” from a woman when she has sex for the first time is reinforcing the idea that sex is something that happens to women and not something we actively engage in. It is implying that our body is some sort of commodity you can give or take from.

Along with this toxic language, with this construct of virginity, comes this notion that virgin women are better because we’re supposedly more “pure.” It fuels this false sense of superiority above women who are sexually active. It teaches women that their self-worth should be informed by the standing of their sexuality instead of who they are as full, multi-dimensional human beings. It tells women that the more sexually active they are, the more their value as a woman depreciates... and we don’t see an issue with that?

It never ceases to amaze me how we, as a society, don’t see the superficiality of modesty, virginity, and this false sense of “purity.” We allow ourselves to reduce women to their sexualities which hinders us from engaging women as actual human beings. We let a woman’s sex life tell us about her moral standing more than we do about any other, more definite indication such as... I don’t know... how she treats other people?

Now, hear me out, this is what I’m NOT saying. I’m not saying that women can not want to have their first time with someone they love and care about. There’s nothing wrong with waiting until marriage if that is what you really want to do. I’m not saying that people who have never engaged in any sexual activity can’t call themselves “virgins.” However, what I AM saying is we have to rid this notion of “purity” that comes with virginity because it does nothing but indirectly objectify women. It does nothing but create this hierarchy where “modest, pure” women are exalted and women who are “immodest” or sexually active are persecuted.

If we want young women to grow up to have healthy relationships towards their bodies and sex, we have to dead the narrative of virginity = pure. We have to stop teaching girls that their bodies are property whose value depreciates when she engages in consensual sex.

## *Fast-Tailed Girls*

One day I was scrolling my timeline on Twitter as per usual. As I was scrolling, I came across a video clip of a Black mother beating her daughter. As I watched the video, I learned that the mother was beating her child for “being a thot.” I was incredibly disturbed by the video but what I was almost more disturbed by was people’s reactions. Black Twitter was actually applauding this woman for beating her daughter, saying that the child shouldn’t have been “fast” in the first place. Her mother was just “teaching her a lesson.”

Hm.

“Fast.”

Remember when I said my mother told me that I didn’t need to be running around, being “fast” like other girls my age? Fast-tailed. A common adjective used in the Black community to describe young Black women and girls who are “promiscuous.” An adjective that does so much damage to a Black girl’s self-image and her relationship towards sex. It’s also a term that fuels rape culture within the Black community because it ignores how older cishet Black men prey upon these impressionable young girls. It allows statutory rape to thrive in our community.

When I saw the video of the Black mother beating her child for “being a thot”, of course I was disturbed but unfortunately, this wasn’t the first time I’ve seen a young Black girl get humiliated via social media by their very own parents for being sexually active.

A while back there was a picture of a Black father humiliating his daughter because he caught her “dating” a grown man. Again, people praised the father for “teaching” his daughter a “lesson” and that she shouldn’t have been a “little thot”, in their words. I just find this all so interesting and by interesting, I mean disturbing.

You found out that your daughter was having sex and your first reaction is to beat her and humiliate her publicly? Instead of opting to having an honest conversation with her about sex, contraceptives, and making well-informed choices? You found out that your daughter was “dating” a grown man and instead of holding the adult man responsible, you publicly punished your young daughter? That makes sense to you?

What happened between these Black parents and their daughters is a reason why the hashtag conversation, #FastTailedGirls, facilitated by Black women, was necessary and still is. When we refer to Black girls as “fast”, we’re fueling our very own intraracial rape culture. We’re neglecting to put the fault on the grown man for preying upon a young, vulnerable girl. We’re, instead, placing blame on her, creating an environment where young Black girls are afraid of coming forward about being sexually assaulted by men in their community.

What also trips me out is when older Black people call young Black girls “fast” for filling out and growing into their curves. Not only are we sexualizing young teens but, again, we’re teaching young girls to be ashamed of their bodies; that they should scale back and hide themselves. A girl’s growing body is not an invitation for grown men to prey on her and try to take advantage of her.

What’s incredibly sad is that we see no fault in reacting violently and abusively upon hearing that our young teen girls are being sexually active. What good does that do? Have we ever stopped to ask they’re sexually active? Does beating them help us get that answer? How is that fruitful for our community? All we’re doing is making our daughters not want to come to us with questions or concerns about sex. Now they’ll continue to go behind our back and unfortunately, make ill-informed choices.

Our daughters are not our property. They may be young but they are still afforded agency. Agency is a human right. Your daughter will make her own choices at the end of the day, regardless of what you’d like to believe. Instead of assuming that your daughter won’t have sex, why not have a conversation with her about taking care of herself

sexually? Why not talk to her about condoms and birth control? Why not just be real about it?

We need to have honest conversations about sexual assault and statutory rape within our community. We need to work to ensure safety and comfort for young Black girls. We need to make sure they develop healthy relationships towards their bodies and sex. It's time to be honest and it's time to stop finding the easy way out--victim blaming and chastising our girls for their budding bodies and men in our community finding that as a green light to take advantage of them.

# Queens vs. Hoes

I'm sure you've seen or heard these type of statements before:

If you've had the pleasure of not hearing any of these kinds of statements before, consider yourself lucky. Unfortunately, I can not say the same. I've heard these statements repeatedly throughout my teen-young adult years. The funny thing is, very few see the harm in the queen vs. hoe dichotomy.

What's the difference between a "queen" and a "hoe" honestly? Typically when people refer to a woman as a "queen", it's a woman who is "modest." Meaning, she doesn't show "too much" skin. She stays inside on the weekends instead of going out and partying. She's what men consider "wifey material." She cooks, she cleans, she basically lives life along the grain. Her womanhood is "acceptable" and the blueprint of what a woman "should be."

The "hoe" people are referring to in the binary is the woman who is "immodest." She loves showing off her body. She is sexually active past what's considered "acceptable" for women. She may be involved in sex work. She may also regularly go out on the weekends and party. She is the woman who lives against the grain. She is what people consider to be the worst kind of woman.

People have this horrible obsession with compartmentalizing women. They can not gauge women unless they can fit a woman in some sort of box whether it's a "queen", "good girl" box or a "hoe", "thot" box. They do not care enough to gauge women as the complex beings that they are. This narrative is harmful because it denies women's humanity. It denies that women are people with a myriad of characteristics, feelings, and thoughts. It is also harmful because it suggests that only

one kind of woman is deserving of respect. It is essentially saying that as long as a woman lives within what is socially acceptable she will be worthy of respect and love but even that “respect” is limited.

I call this regard for women “conditional respect.” People can not respect a woman or give her common courtesy unless she fits into their idea of what a woman should be. Their respect for women is so minimal that shallow things such as clothing determines how they will treat and regard said woman. Just because a woman presents herself in a way someone does not care for, does not mean that gives them the right to degrade her.

In order to fully accept and understand this, people have to examine why they feel that only one kind of woman is deserving of respect. From the day we are born, we are taught a patriarchal, rigid notion of what a woman should be: a mother, wife, homemaker, “nurturing”, and “modest.” We are not taught to respect women as individuals but rather by how well they fit into a box.

Think about it. We are taught to judge a woman’s value by shallow things such as what she chooses to wear, what she looks like, and who she’s sleeping with but rarely by who she is as a person. Rarely about what she believes in and stands for. Rarely by how she treats other people. The sad part is we don’t even interrogate why we view women is such a vapid way.

In order to fully understand why the “queen vs. hoe” binary is harmful, one would have to unlearn these toxic, patriarchal ideals they’ve been fed about what a woman should be. In short, people would actually have to see women as human beings. Amazing, right?

If someone can only respect one kind of woman, they don’t actually respect women at our core. If they can only respect a woman for some archaic reason or because she has some familial value to them, they don’t actually respect women as a whole. If the only thing that’s keeping you from disrespecting me is because I’m related to you or because I fit into this mold, you don’t respect me, as a woman. Meaning, you don’t even see my womanhood as something that’s inherently worthy of



respect. In a patriarchal society, we are not brought up to default women as valuable. We are not brought up to believe that “woman” as an identity is something alone worthy of respect and worthy of humane treatment. You are taught that a woman has to be suitable for your consumption--in some sort of aspect--for you to be able to value and respect her. Her being a human being like yourself is not enough for you. You have to be given a reason to find her worthy of respect. How can we not see that as troubling?

All kinds of women are deserving of respect. The “modest” woman is deserving of respect, yes, but so is the woman people call a “hoe.” How someone treats a woman should not be contingent upon a woman’s sexual activities, identity, and expression. A woman’s sex life doesn’t speak to her morality. That should not be the deciding factor on whether a woman is a “good” person or not.

What a woman does in the bedroom is none of our business nor does it affect us in any way. So why is it that we use that to decide whether she’s a good person or not? Does it ever cross one’s mind that a woman can be “modest” and still be a horrible person? A woman can be dressed from head to toe, “saving” herself for marriage and still treat others poorly. A woman can show lots of skin, have all the sex in the world, and have a heart of gold. Her heart of gold isn’t even considered because she’s written off as a “hoe” because in our minds, we believe a woman’s sex life and how she sheaths her body is the epitome of her morality.

People have to unlearn this impulse to place women into boxes. Instead, we need to view women as human beings who are individuals and not caricatures. Society has to stop insulting us by simplifying our complexities as human beings and recognize that we can be multi-faceted. A woman can be book smart, love to cook, be a bomb ass mom and know how to twerk. A woman can love sex and have a degree. It does not have to be one or the other. We have an array of interests and characteristics. Once people stop seeing women in an one-dimensional lens and respect all types of women--not just the ones

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