

The Saartjie Baartman's Body Shape versus the Victorian Dress: The Untold African Treasures

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Abstract

In most African countries, it is still a common belief that thin women are not attractive. Until the 21st century, full-figured women were considered attractive, were respected, and their padded (with flesh) and curvaceous bodies represented wealth, fertility and good health. The western society views a thin woman as ideal body and has forced many women including Africans to believe that a body that deviates from it is unaccepted. Fashion designers use the thin model as a basis from which to create ready-to-wear clothing for all consumers including those whose body characteristics do not comply with the ideal body features. This has resulted in unsatisfied consumers with clothing sold in the retail stores and negative reactions towards their bodies. The problem of ideal body versus un-ideal body shape date back to 19th Century, where Saartjie Baartman's body shape characterised by full breasts, narrow waist and extra large buttocks was viewed by Europeans as ugly, yet later on, the same body, though not acknowledged, was used to inspire the creation of Victorian bustle dress that resembled her body in every aspect. This article examines the relationship between the Victorian Bustle dress that became popular from 1870 onwards and the unique body features of Saartjie Baartman, an African slave who was displayed in Europe against her wish as from 1810 to 1815, and even after her death, her body continued to be exhibited in a Museum in Paris. This paper concludes that her body could have inspired the development of the Victorian bustle dress. The paper encourages African women to view their bodies sensibly rather than basing their beauty on the western standard ideologies. Likewise, promotional media houses are encouraged to portray all body shapes fairly and positively. African researchers are advised to search beyond surfaces of historical events for the purposes of documenting underlying important facts affecting Africa.

Keywords

Saartjie Baartman, Pear Shaped Body, Full-Figured Women, Victorian Bustle Dress,

South Africa

1. Introduction and Background

Pear body shape is a silhouette in which the hipline area and upper thigh region is much fuller than that of hourglass silhouette but the upper torso/bust area is smaller than the hourglass silhouette with narrow shoulders [1]. The African pear body shape is characterised by an exaggerated hips and a large amount of fat in the buttocks. The South African Media report that pear shaped bodies are popular amongst South African women of African Origin ([2]. This has been confirmed that 60% of young African women in South Africa are pear shaped [3]. The African pear body shape can be connected to Saartjie Baartman (**Figure 1**) who travelled across Europe in the early 19th century and was said to represent the body shapes of most African women. She left South Africa in 1808 to accompany her boss Hendrick Caesar who assured her that she will find fame and fortune as soon as she arrives in London. She was a full-figured woman, with full breasts, extra large hips and steatopygia, that is, a large amount of fat in the buttocks, which drew attention of many Europeans who had never seen such a figure with unique features [4]-[7]. She was depicted as the black version of feminine beauty, the Hottentot Venus¹. She was said to represent the body shapes of most African women and was the shape considered most appealing by fellow black men and women [8]. Ironically, the Europeans labelled her body as ugly [4] [5] [9] perhaps as a consolation to the European women who did not possess such body features. It may be argued that there was no way that her protruding buttocks, rounded breasts and her curvaceous body generally did not arouse European men's sexual desire, which in turn could have resulted in envious women who did not possess the unique feature.

Saartjie Baartman's body shape was displayed in London stage for public show between 1810 and 1811, and in 1815 she was further displayed against her will for 10 hours a day in Paris after Taylor (her master in England) sold her to Reaux who later became her master in Paris. She had to mimic savagery and exposed her body, first in carnivals, then in the aristocratic salons of Paris, later on among the libertines and finally in brothels where she ended up being a prostitute [5]. In the meantime, French anatomists took an interest in her unusual anatomy (enormous buttocks and labia) only to declare her the missing link from ape to man [4]. The question that needs to be asked is, as a prostitute, who then had sexual intercourse with her being half ape? The answer is of course the very civilized European slave masters. Saartjie's sexual body determined character, which compelled politicians and bureaucrats to devise laws throughout Europe to control the biological deviance of prostitutes and their Hottentot sexuality that was viewed to have preyed on men [10]. Ironically, a person viewed as half ape was also seen as sexually provoking to Europeans. In the same context, African American women for example have a long history of sexual victimization [11]. During slavery, Black women were considered property and

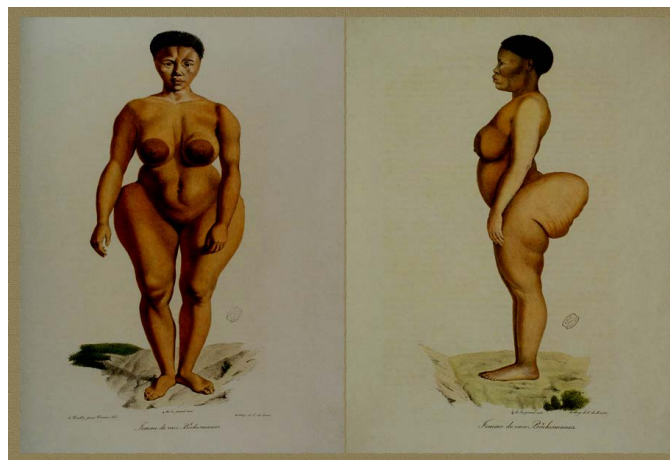


Figure 1. Saartjie Baartman's unique body features (source: <http://www.museumboerhaavenl>).

¹Hottentot Venus was a South African woman who was depicted as the black version of feminine beauty (Crais & Scully, 2008).

were raped to provide sexual pleasure and babies for White slaveholders [12] [13]. Even after slavery was banned, African American women continued to be subjects of sexual exploitation because they served as domestic workers for the White families. Lack of job options and lack of financial stability amplified their vulnerability and reduced their likelihood of complaining about sexual harassment [14].

The aim of this paper is therefore to interrogate relationship between historical Victorian bustle dress and the African slave Saartjie Baartman who was paraded and displayed in Europe due to her unique body features. The paper presents African view of the ideal female figure and compares it with western view of the ideal figure. It points out that Saartjie Baartman's presence in Europe precedes the time of Victorian dress. The paper examines close similarities of the bustle dress silhouette structure with Saartjie Baartman's body shape and argues that since Saartjie Baartman had been displayed prior to the development of the Victorian dress coupled with very close similarities in features, it is possible that the body inspired the creation of the dress. Furthermore history is known to be used by designers to inspire new creations.

2. African View of the Ideal Female Figure

Over centuries, every society has had its own unique standard of feminine beauty [15]. Body image in the context of Africa has not been the topic of many researchers. The majority of the studies on feminine beauty have been conducted in Western societies [16]. Perceptions about beauty differ from country to country and from culture to culture. However, one common denominator that remains the same across cultures and countries is the desire to be accepted by the society and to be adored by many [17] [18]). African women generally have protruding buttocks and mostly fall within the full-figured category [19]. In most African countries it is still a common belief that thin individuals are not attractive. Until the 21st century, full-figured women were considered attractive, were respected, and their bodies represented wealth, fertility and good health [20] [21]. In the majority of African countries, a full-figured woman is seen as spousal material and is sometimes envied by both men and women [22]. It is reported that some African women are encouraged to gain weight and young thin girls are force fed in countries such as Mauritania, some parts of Nigeria and Niger [23].

There are fattening houses used specifically to fatten women in West African countries, highlighting the fact that some African countries still value and idolize full-figured women [22] [24]. A study conducted by [22] revealed that Ghanaian women considered a full-figured woman to be more attractive than a thin woman. Women all over the world are being presented with the same standards of beauty in magazines, television and billboards [24]. The "thin is beautiful" is a worldwide phenomenon, while all human cultures are concerned about physical appearance [25] [26]. It is a common practice in all human societies to alter the body in order to meet an ideal set for that specific era [27]. African communities that are exposed to Western media are experiencing a shift in their perception of feminine beauty. Studies reveal that non-Western women exposed to Western beauty ideals are more concerned with their body shapes just like Western women [28], indicating that a number of non-Western societies are accepting Western standards of beauty [29]. This is evident in African fashion shows that feature thin African models as well as the dress styles of African women. While it is clear that African societies have considered a full-figured woman as beautiful, the presence of Western media has caused conflict between the African and Western ideal. The thin fashion model has affected how full-figured African women view and dress their bodies. This is evident in the increase in the number of African women engaging in weight-loss activities. Full-figured African women go to gyms so that they can lose weight and look like the thin fashion model and not necessarily for health reasons. Engaging in weight-loss programmes and dressing like the thin model indicates that they endorse the thin body as being ideal and that their own bodies are not attractive. Additionally, this indicates that the African way of dressing is also not attractive.

3. The Western View versus the African View of the Ideal Female Figure

As mentioned above, the ideal female body in Western countries is thin with very little body fat or no fat at all [30]. On the contrary, African countries including South Africa have always considered a full-figured body to be ideal [28]. However the full-figured woman is over shadowed by the thin ideal. The changing perception of feminine beauty in African countries particularly those living in urban areas is largely influenced by Western media [31] [32]. Worldwide, advertising is held accountable for spreading and influencing customer culture and values all around the globe [33]. The African ideal is very different from the Western ideal; hence full-figured women find themselves in a predicament—on one hand, the tradition that being full-figured is attractive and on

the other hand, that the thin figure ideal is. These thoughts can be troubling, especially to a full-figured woman who is constantly surrounded by images of thin fashion models. Eating disorders caused by women's desires to resemble the thin fashion model are on the increase in developing countries and are therefore not restricted to Western societies [34]. South Africa is more industrially developed than most of the other sub-Saharan African countries. Therefore Western images of thin fashion models tend to be more prevalent in South Africa than in other African countries. South Africa, like other African countries, developed its own standard of feminine beauty prior to the entry of the Western media. As already seen in the introductory part of this paper, the earliest recollection of the ideal standard of feminine beauty in South Africa can be linked to Saartjie Baartman (Figure 1) from as early as the 19th century. Although Europeans labelled her half ape with ugly body features, the same body though not acknowledged by any history of fashion authors, was used to inspire the creation Victorian bustle dress that was designed to replicate her body characteristics.

As observed in Figure 1, Saartjie Baartman's body is characterised by distinctively exaggerated buttocks that jut outwards, while her breasts are full and rounded. Her waistline is narrower than her shoulders, bust line and the hipline. Although her hipline region is way larger than the rest of the body parts, her body cannot be a true pear shaped because her breasts are full and rounded unlike in a pear shaped characterised by small breasts.

Saartjie Baartman's body cannot qualify as an hourglass body because her hips are exaggeratedly larger than the waist, the bust and the shoulders. Her body would therefore be best described as Hourglass-Pear shaped (Hourg-Pear), which combines large fleshy breasts with over exaggerated hipline. These characteristics typify a sexy woman in African context as both the large buttocks and the full rounded breasts are sexually provoking.

The following section illustrates the relationship between the famous Victorian bustle dress of the 19th Century and Saartjie Baartman's body structure.

4. The Bustle Dress Silhouette versus Saartjie Baartman's Body Shape

The first Victorian bustle dress (Figure 2), sometimes known as the Grecian bend was first in fashion in 1870-1875 and the second bustle silhouette was worn between 1883 and 1890, after it had been introduced in Paris in 1880. These garments became the fashionable dresses of the 19th century—way after Saartjie Baartman had been displayed in Europe in 1810-1815, and even after her death, her body continued to be displayed in a museum.

Although the western society branded Saartjie Baartman as ugly with highly unusual bodily features, the bustle dress silhouette, which became fashionable in Europe, was no doubt inspired by Saartjie Baartman's body. After Saartjie's death, her body continued to be displayed in a museum [10]. What was so special about a dead body? Her unique shape needed to remain for display, for how long would one want to continue admiring a dead

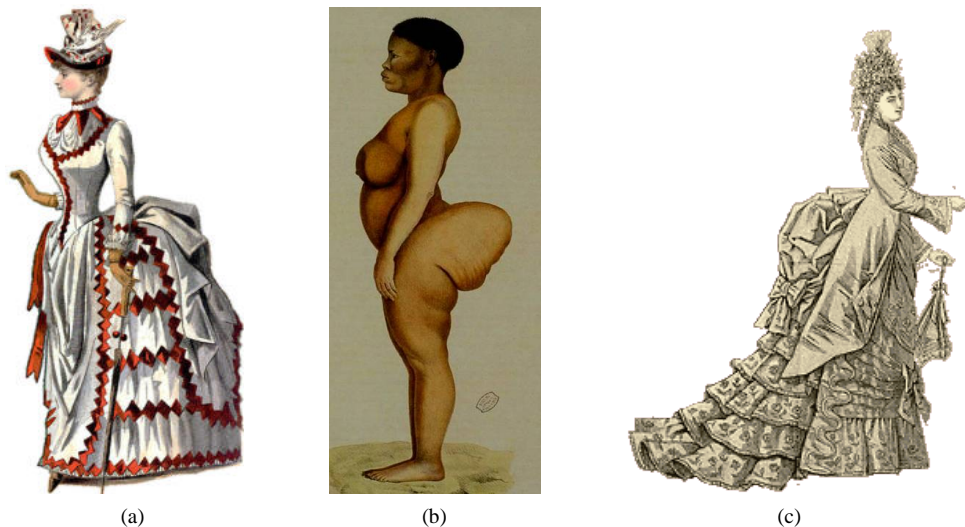


Figure 2. Similarities between Saartjie Baartman's body and the Victorian Bustle dress. (a) Victorian bustle dress that came into force and fashion lime line in 1885 (source: Virag, 2008; www.vintageconnection.net/BustleDresses); (b) Saartjie Baartman (Source: <http://www.museumboerhaave.nl>; <http://www.jungnewyork.com>); (c) Victorian bustle dress that came into force and fashion lime line in 1885 (source: Virag, 2008; www.vintageconnection.net/BustleDresses).

ugly person? The answer of course is that only treasures are preserved, and indeed Saartjie's body was a treasure not only to her people who gave her a dignified burial in her South African home after many years of slavery in Europe, but also a source of inspiration for the famous Victorian dress of the 19th Century that was named after the royal queen Victoria of England. It is worth noting that in Africa and South Africa to be precise, large buttocks and hipline region is considered an attractive feature of a woman [19]. As will be seen later in this paper, some women of the 21st century enlarge their buttocks and breasts through plastic surgery or by wearing padded underwear to enhance their sexual appeal.

Critically looking at the dresses displayed in **Figure 2** and comparing them with Saartjie Baartman (**Figure 1** & **Figure 2**), it is striking to note the close resemblance between the dress and Saartjie Baartman's body. Although Saartjie wore no braziers, her breasts were large and rounded that would appear as if they were pushed forward if she wore a bra. The bust line of the Victorian bustle dress has a well shaped corset designed to give an illusion of exaggerated breasts, narrow waistline and exaggerated hip line with protruding and jutted out buttocks depicted in Saartjie's body shape. The question is: why would European fashion designers emulate a figure of inferior standard if it was not indeed admirable? Obviously, her sexy body needed to be replicated in a form of fashion so as to be worn by many women who did not possess such a body feature. The "curiosity" created by Baartman's body had to be transformed into a fashion trend after her death. Further clarification on the question asked here is given on the following paragraph.

Charles Mathews a popular actor of the time (1888) in his memoirs writes "... **in those days, when bustles were not, she was a curiosity, for English ladies wore no shape but what nature gave and insisted upon**" [35]. Saartjie Baartman's body filled ambiguous position of what was naturally unnatural [35]. This clearly demonstrates that bustle dresses were not in existence before Saartjie Baartman's body had been displayed. It also clearly shows that English women's body were considered unshaped as pointed out in the following phrase "... **English ladies wore no shape but what nature gave and insisted upon**" [35]. Having not seen such kind of a unique body shape before, the Europeans were curious about it as confirmed by the phrase "... **Saartjie Baartman's body filled ambiguous position of what was naturally unnatural**" [35]). Another question arising here is how then did Saartjie Baartman's body inspire the Victorian bustle dress?

It is important to understand that a garment design process is a creative process of coming up with a unique product. The process utilises design elements such as colour, texture pattern, silhouette and shape to create a garment [36]. Design process entails a great deal of planning before executing of a product (garment). A designer aspiring to create a unique product does some basic design research on various aspects to inspire idea generation. Design research defines the range of possible sources of inspirations, such as existing design (historical costumes, past and present trends), images (illustrations & pictures), works of art (paintings & sculptures), objects (shapes & silhouette) and phenomena from nature or everyday lives. Sources of inspiration play an important role in the design process, both in defining the context for new designs and in informing the creation of individual designs [37]. In the context of this study, Saartjie Baartman's body served as an object (silhouette) and her being the "curiosity" was the phenomenon of the time that inspired the development of the bustle dress. These characteristics qualified her body as a design inspiration, particularly after her death. The designers of the time needed to transform that curiosity into a wearable ensemble that many women could wear for sexual expression.

As already seen in **Figure 2**, there are very close similarities between Saartjie Baartman's body shape and the bustle dress. The bustle which is the fullness around the buttock area of the dress was achieved by use of a wire cage or frame tied around a woman's buttock area (**Figure 3**). This framework had to be worn between an under skirt and an over garment. The bustle dress, like all kinds of fashion, was used to divide the upper and lower income class in Europe [38]. The bustle dress was seen as a luxury dress since it was only affordable to the rich people [38]). The production of bustle dress involve a tedious process of technical input, long hours of pattern development, cutting and assembling in addition to many meters of fabrics and wires required to ornament and create effect of enlarged butt on the dress (Authors personal experience in making the bustle dress). Having observed the similarities of the dress and Saartjie Baartman's body, it is astounding that such a humble human being could be used to inspire and create a luxurious dress of the 19th century which was not only the fashion of the time, but was named after prestigious queen Victoria of the English royal family.

More interestingly, Western women in the 21st century desire to have large protruding buttocks. It is currently fashionable for women to possess large protruding bottoms as seen in **Figure 4**. The word "bootylicious" which was recently added to the Oxford English Dictionary, is used to describe a woman with protruding buttocks [39].

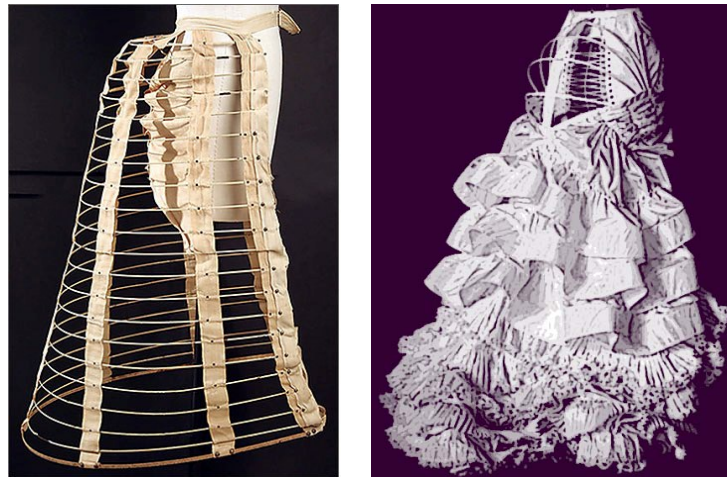


Figure 3. Wire framework worn in between an under skirt and an over garment to create an illusion of exaggerated and jutting out buttocks (source: <http://www.gbacg.org/great-pattern-review/truly-victorian.html>; <http://www.mysewingsickness.wordpress.com/category/bustle-dress/>).

Bootylicious has become fashionable to the point that some Western women undergo cosmetic surgery to attain the large protruding bottom. It seems yet again that the African female body is influencing the fashion trends to some degree. Women who cannot afford buttock augmentation surgery can engage in Butt enhancing exercises or can wear a buttock bra which lifts the buttock and creates an illusion of a bigger protruding buttock [40]. Another product in the market is the booty pop or a padded panty worn underneath pants or dresses which also creates an illusion of a larger protruding buttock [40].

Although protruding buttocks may have influenced fashion in one way or the other, African women continue to experience difficulties accepting their protruding buttocks because society tells them that what they have is ugly [41]). This is because for many years dating to back to Saartjie Baartman's time, protruding buttocks have been made to appear unattractive by Western media. Majority of Western women who have always assumed superior positions and feel to be better than the African women, do not possess this kind of shape. African women also find it difficult to locate pants, skirts and dresses with a perfect fit in a clothing retail store because available clothing are designed on the basis of a well-balanced body characteristics of the Western Idealised figure. The pear shaped African woman cannot find a garment that caters for her large buttocks and at the same time fit appropriately around her narrow waistline, due to westernised sizing system² that continue to undermine the African body characteristics. It is unreasonable to expect that everyone will conform to a single, ultra-thin standard. It is evident in this paper that the majority of South African women are not as thin as the fashion models but have broader hipline and a narrow waist line unlike a well proportioned western idealised figure³.

5. Conclusion

It is clear that the Western society humiliated and ridiculed Saartjie Baartman because of her race and unique body. It is also true that despite labelling Saartjie a sub-human, there was something special a hidden treasure in her that inspired fashion and ultimately, contributed to history of fashion. Although this has never been out rightly reported, it necessitates that African researchers should search beyond the surfaces of historical events so as to uncover important hidden facts for documentation. Well designed apparel is one that will enhance aesthetic appeal of the wearer and usually a well dressed person is seen or viewed as attractive or in other words normally referred to as being "sexy". It can be argued that Saartjie Baartma's "sexy" body features inspired the creation of

²Sizing systems is the assignment of body dimensions and a group of body shapes representing a market segment. The dimensions and the body shapes are presented in a size chart for the purposes of creating a set of ready-made apparel for a variety of people in a target market (Ashdown, 2000; Petrova, 2007:57).

³Idealised body shape is a shape perceived by the western society as perfect with most body characteristics being well proportioned (Armstrong 1995:33). The body is assumed to provide a silhouette that will fulfil everyone's desired image of perfection, but in reality it denies African consumers to view their bodies sensibly (Lewis, 2007:319).



Figure 4. Padded underwear. Booty pop, padded underwear to provide an illusion of large hips and buttocks (source: <http://www.bootypop.com>).

a popular Bustle dress of the time. Although the connection between the Victorian Dress and Saartjie Baartman's body has never been documented, Altick, explained clearly that her body was a curiosity before the bustle came into Fashion [37]. Today, it is also witnessed with the availability of padded underwear and cosmetic surgery that the African peculiar shape is secretly admired. Since the western society is adamant in acknowledging what Africa has contributed to history and knowledge, African researchers are expected to take the lead in documenting historical matters such as this one. There are many women in Africa with unique body shapes; it is time that Africans begin to cherish themselves, while the media is encouraged to portray these unique body shapes positively. It is also recommended that the fashion industry should begin to address size and fit problems of women with such body shapes. Developing customised sizing systems is an invaluable step towards acknowledging body diversity existing in a market place.

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