

The Mammy Image: A Study on the Women Characters in Alice Walker's

The Third Life of Grange Copeland

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ABSTRACT

The Lives of the Black women of the earlier times in America had always been bitter, hard and gruesome. The feminist movements are a recent entry in the lives of the women of the Third World. With such political movements happening all around the world, those decked up cruelty of the past slowly regained and retraced its way to the light. African American writing was always fresh and discussed the lives of the Americans in true colours, especially the women's writing is a step far ahead. This paper tries to retrace the concept of the Mammy image of the Black women in the novel *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* by Alice Walker. The mammy image is discussed through the major women characters of the novel and the ways they dealt with their lives.

Keywords: Black Women, Alice Walker, dominance, Mammy, abuse, slave

The reimagining of the Black women shows a societal need to create their own definition or ideas that better suit what they wanted to believe about Black women, the treatment they received, and the actions they did in response to that treatment. The most devastating tragedy the African American women face is seemingly lacking the power or position in society to define themselves. The white oppressive culture from the past has created dehumanizing images that continue to limit African American women. These images not only influence the collective minds of society distorting their view, but they also control the way Black women see themselves and each other in respect to their position in society. As with many images, the historical presence of the mammy was not the image now used to portray African American women. They ran away or helped other slaves escape, fought back when punished, and in some cases, poisoned slave owners. In order to deal with this uncomfortable reality, historians and authors rewrote history to create the image of the loyal, happy, mammy.

This paper tries to identify the definition has stuck in American cultural references to Black women and the mammy image continues to be used and reintroduced in various forms. Bell Hooks addresses this rewriting of a historical account of Black women. According to her work the mammy stereotype developed around the desire to create an image of Black women

that would not pose a threat to the dominance of white patriarchy. In spite of the reality that most housekeepers were young single women, white people chose to construct the image of the caretaker/housekeeper as fat, asexual, unhygienic, falling out of her shoes, and most importantly possessing an overwhelming love for white people (Hooks 84). This new image presented little challenge to the dominant white society, and its popularity has permeated American culture for years.

The role Black women play in their families even in today's society develops out of necessity, and to believe that all Black women are strong and capable is what perpetuates the mammy stereotype. The idea of the strong Black women is so prevalent that Black women continue to struggle with living up to this aspect of the mammy stereotype. The mammy image's ability to permeate all levels of society encourages authors such as Alice Walker with her womanist views to deconstruct these limiting definitions for Black women and women as a whole. However, the growth of Black woman's experiences in fiction changed stereotypes like the mammy image. It is this changing stereotypical image that leads to the characters in Alice Walker's work that are trapped by their inability to fulfil their own needs and desires because they are wives.

In Alice Walker's *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, a family living in the South faces debilitating poverty and other societal pressures that set into motion the growth of Grange Copeland and the downfall of his son. Though the men and their experiences are at the forefront of the novel, the way the men's lives affect the women around them is what the analysis of this text will focus on. The character to analyse from this novel is Margaret and her suspension and movement away from the mammy image.

At the beginning of the novel, the Copeland family is set in comparison to Margaret's family from the North. The Copeland's live on a sharecropping farm barely surviving, while Margaret's family seems to be well off and pleased with their life in the north; and it is this that draws attention to Margaret's role in her family. Grange Copeland's position in the family dictates the way his wife behaved, as well as his son. Ann duCille discusses this particular dynamic as a legacy of the Black marriage after slavery. The husband was the master of his wife much like the way the white slave owner was the master of the slaves (53). This master to servant/slave role suspends Margaret in a weekly cycle of work, poverty, and verbal abuse. It is an element of their position in society that suspends this entire family.

As a wife of a sharecropper, Margaret's major responsibility was to work for the survival of her husband and son. W. Lawrence Hogue discusses the limitations on Margaret's life when he says, "She can attend to her son when time allows, remain loyal and submissive to Grange, or commit suicide" (49). This also shows the willingness of Margaret to stay true to her role as wife. However, Margaret eventually abandons her role of wife and strays from her duties and the restricting characteristics of the mammy. Margaret's daily activities towards the survival of her family and the dutiful obligation to her husband are the elements that are a part of the central image of the mammy. Her decision to escape ultimately changes her into a woman driven to fulfil her own needs and desires.

Alice Walker veers away from the stereotyped mammy/matriarch image and adds dynamic qualities to Margaret through her escape. Margaret and Grange's fights lead her to act in a way distinctively different from what is expected of a wife. The novel reads, "Gone were the times she waited alone on Saturday afternoons for people who never came. Now

when her husband left her at home and went into town, she followed” (The *TLGC* 16). Margaret smelled different, acted different, and dressed differently. This transformation changes the dynamics of the Copeland household, even if just for the weekend. The master loses control of his wife and no longer is the wife trapped under his domination. Margaret travels into the world leaving behind the obligations and demands placed upon her because of Grange and their poverty—stricken life.

Margaret and Grange both experience the freedom of the weekend, but Margaret reverts back to her role during the week. Walker writes, “On weekdays when sober and wifely, she struggled to make food out of plants that grew wild and game caught solely in traps, she was submissive still” (20). She returns to her weekly submissive duties with her husband and the weekends are reserved for a quasi-freed Margaret. It is her neglect of the illegitimate baby that shows her true devotion to her masterly husband Grange. There is love in this marriage that struggles to exist within the context of the hard life the Copelands face, and the remnants of Margaret’s submission is due to a want and need to maintain what remains of their once loving connection.

Grange’s eventual escape North severs Margaret’s tie to her role as wife, and she ends her life in response to the abandonment. Margaret’s suicide shines light on the effect of the debilitating impoverished existence of a sharecropper’s wife. The choice to end her life and abandon her legitimate son contradicts the characteristics associated with the mammy including being strong, loving, and religious. Margaret could not experience true freedom from her oppressive existence except through suicide. The cycle of misery Margaret felt ended when she committed suicide, thus gaining true the only true freedom she could find.

Brownfield’s perspective of his parents’ relationship is very limited, leaving him in the dark about the true character of his mother, his father, and the difficulties they face. This absence of awareness is shown in his perspective of his mother as the family dog and his lack of understanding of his father’s reaction to the man in the truck. This shade is lifted when Brownfield gets married and treats his own wife the way his father treated his mother continuing the master/servant cycle of impoverished Black marriages after slavery. Kate Cochran suggests, “Just as each week in the sharecropping homes follows a cycle of depression and violence, so too does the lineage of the characters continue a pattern” (84). Brownfield’s observations of his parents relationship alters his understanding of relationships and leads to the eventual entrapment of his wife Mem.

Mem’s reaction to her husband’s abuse reflects characteristics of the mammy image. It says, “she accepted all his burdens along with her own and dealt with them from her own greater heart and greater knowledge” (The *TLGC* 55). Mem’s knowledge above all gives her awareness of what her husband faces and she shows strength and love in spite of that. Her loving, caring actions continue, and the mammy qualities she exhibits are explained. Brownfield, like his father, seeks out Josie for money and relief while “leaving Mem to carry on the struggle for domestic survival any way she chose and was able to manage” (The *TLGC* 55).

Mem struggles for the survival of her family and this validates certain qualities of the mammy, but not in the exclusive sense of Black women readily accepting this image. It is out of survival that these qualities became prevalent for Black women in the South. Mem is transformed into the woman any sharecropping husband would want in the eyes of

Brownfield. He, however, fails to realize it is out of her devoted love for him that she allows this. Love is what allows Mem to be trapped, but it is the poverty and dehumanization that causes it to occur.

Eventually, Mem becomes barely a woman. Brownfield feeds on her sadness and desolation, but cannot stand her anger. This anger is what eventually allows Mem to seek something better for her family. Mem does take a stand demanding respect from her husband for herself and their children. She expects him to accept responsibility for his actions and this is when Walker breaks away from the mammy imagery Mem showed before. No longer accepting of sparing her husband's feelings and preserving his manhood, Mem attacks Brownfield and his way of life (90). Even when his family was finally able to experience the life he wanted them to have in town, Brownfield still worked to keep his wife trapped. Mem had overcome their poverty through her tenacity, but it is Brownfield's anger that keeps her suspended in his web.

In *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* the wives are dominated by the idea that Black women cook, clean, and take care of the children. The women are trapped by their circumstances, which leave them in a state of suspension. This position they live in warrants them the abuse they experience at the hands of their husbands. Observers, in the time after slavery, would have thought this common place and acceptable. In these two novels, Walker shows the brutality of staying strong for survival and she also illustrates Black women's loss of humanity at the hands of their husbands. The picture Walker paints of the suspended woman shows the limitations that existed as well as the ways in which Black husbands reinforced the suspension. The humanity these women possess is snatched away just as the mammy image zaps the humanity of Southern Black women and continues to work against the possibility of a self-definition for Black women.

The women in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* that are in this assimilated stage find independence in their sexual lifestyles by resisting societal norms of proper sexual behavior; however, they continue to be limited by their families and their communities. The limitation that the women experience stems from a desire to dispel the negative idea of the Black female sexuality in the form of the jezebel stereotype. The same way that Walker moves her characters away from the mammy image, she moves them away from the jezebel by illustrating diverse experiences in Black female sexuality.

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