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SCOALA DOCTORALA DE STUDII FILOLOGICE

THE IMAGE OF THE MAMMY IN AMERICAN LITERATURE
AND ON THE SILVER SCREEN

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IASI

2014

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SUMMARY

Key-Words: Mammy, North, South, Master, slave, stereotype, feminism, Civil War, Black women, typologies of white women, race and hierarchy.

There are several reasons underlying this choice of the theme for the present PhD thesis. First of all, as a former student in the American Studies program, I sought to circumscribe the thesis to its specificity, therefore I considered the African-American minority and especially Black women (embodied by Mammy) to be a very interesting topic that leaves room for different interpretations. The life and sufferings of this Black woman can give the reader a new perspective over the life on the plantation. Her resistance to all types of pain (physical and mental pain) and strong personality are conclusive evidence of the harsh life in a society where white supremacy was pervasive. Moreover, her figure is worthy analyzing, in the way it appears both in literature and in movies where the stereotypical image of the Mammy is presented in all kinds of situations.

Mammy is one of the most visible figures in the myth of the faithful slave, the main character in the stories and images transmitted from generation to generation. The stories were designed to show that there was a strong emotional connection between this woman and all white members of the family and also to present her as the embodiment of benevolence. Mammy cares for her master's children, does the cooking, and is the friend and adviser of the mistress. Mammy's image was popularized through art, literature and cinema, but also through many elements of novelty such as ash trays and kitchen utensils. This was done so as to counterbalance the effects of slavery narratives already published in those days, presenting the horrors and cruelties of the system, and to minimize the impact of the growing abolitionist work.

The many "incarnations" of the image of Mammy had a tremendous influence on American culture. There is no area that did not paid her a tribute in some form or another. For example, artist Andy Warhol included mammy and Aunt Jemima together with Uncle Sam, the latter being a specific symbol of the American culture. In 1980, the Italian

photographer Olivero Toscani created an advertisement for Benetton clothing company, in which a black woman feeding a white baby at her breast was clothed with a garment signed by the above mentioned company. The advertisement was criticized by the African-American community, although it won more awards than any other advertising image ever created and presented by the company. Moreover, tourists can visit today in Kentucky, Lancaster, a former plantation belonging to Governor William Owsley, ironically called "Pleasant Retreat". The plantation depicts an attraction element - Mammy's bench, a combination of swing and chair, created to ease the work of Mammy when breastfeed her child or the master's children, facilitating breastfeeding and rocking at the same time. In 1920 "nipple dolls" made of rubber appeared, which were shaped bottles that represented Mammy's swaying a white baby; they have become extremely sought by collectors from America.

Stories of faithful slaves were considered profitable, both politically and economically. Therefore, M.M. Manring sought for the reason why Aunt Jemima's character persisted in American culture. Manring follows Mammy's evolution from her roots in slavery and stories from the South during Reconstruction and the reinterpretations of the century through the advertisements of Aunt Jemima, who plays a symbolic role in the civil rights movement. The initial success of Aunt Jemima's brand was based on a variety of factors, ranging from attempts to reunite the country after the Civil War, to marketing strategies during WWI.

Mammy has been depicted as the faithful slave, subjected to her master, and the latter as the one who praised and recognized her loyalty, but only to the extent that his own goodness was glorified. Representations of African-American mothers in 1820-1850 have in common Mammy's image, be it images from postcards, literature, travel stories and propaganda work and even religious work. The image of a lively Black woman with a child in her arms is symbolic for the South.

The earliest use of the word "Mammy" can be found in 1810, in a travel narrative, where the word is used when talking about the South. Etymological roots speak of a mixture between "ma'am" and "mamma", but the term was used to describe a certain type of person or behavior, and it was associated with Black women. (Wallace Sanders, 2008: 4). In her book, Sanders masterfully illustrates how this icon of African-American

womanhood becomes prominent in supporting hierarchies of race, gender, and class in the United States. Far from being a timeless image, Mammy is idealized repeatedly. Aunt Jemima was introduced for the first time in the Chicago World Fair in 1893 as a relative of "Mammy", her alter ego, but not babysitting, her place being in the kitchen. She was created to be included in a Southern romanticized mythology, where slaves and masters live in harmony and communion with each other (Morgan, 1995: 87). Aunt Jemima has become a brand in the commercial field and tried to reunite and "save" the country after the Civil War.

Mammy is presented through stereotypical and exaggerated features. She is lively and tall, tells stories and sings, has enormous white teeth and a loud laughter. She talks the dialect of the plantation and is devoted to her mistress, which clearly reflects the inferiority and her servile nature by birth. She does not have a name besides "Mammy" and she is always wearing a scarf on her head and an apron. She loves her master's children more than her own, while her offspring are just playmates for the whites, usually being depicted as coarse and dirty. She has authority in the household, but is also regarded with doubt by other slaves, being accused of identification with the white culture. Mammy came to be represented as a strong, strong, happy woman, without sexual traits, with a strong religious faith, working hard to please her master and his family. This image has satisfied primarily the white audience, consumers of media or printed literature. However, her image has come to be embraced by the African-American community that accepted the role of Black women in the household of the white master, knowing that this is the only way that Blacks could be accepted by society and integrated into the patriarchal society dominated by whites.

Therefore, Mammy could be represented only as a strong woman who is infinitely happy to spend her whole life in the kitchen taking care of white children; it was an appropriate role for this social category. However, when these women were not able to be integrated into this category, they fell into disgrace, being seen as sexual beings, embodying the temptress. Thus, if Mammy could not be stripped of her sexuality, she could easily be perceived as a woman who tempts her master, but without him being accused of adultery. In the last two decades, motherhood was carefully investigated by feminist critics such as Patricia Hill Collins, Julia Kristeva, Adrienne Rich, Deborah Grey

White. These personalities have tried the re-construction of maternal image analyzing it as a cultural landscape that constantly develops and evolves. Their theories have influenced the perception of Mammy's motherhood as being related to and contoured by the patriarchal system.

This paper deals with all these aspects of the stereotypical image of the Mammy, given her presence as a slave, and woman, with all kinds of needs and desires, as mother to all the children in her life. Therefore, to understand this character, the first chapter touches the issue of slavery and how it has evolved over time. Suzanne Miers and Igor Kopytoff defined slavery analyzing it in terms of its psychological dimension. They declared that "slavery is an institution of" marginality ". On the other hand, the conflict between North and South is also present as a milestone in the history of slavery in the United States. The relationship between slave and owner is also analyzed, focusing here on Frederick Douglass's narrative, in which he examines the harshness of slavery, its pervasive tendency to dehumanize its victims, which are described in from the masters' viewpoint. In the same chapter "the birth" of Mammy is explained as a natural phenomenon through which society is trying to counteract the consequences of its actions against Black people.

But how could Mammy be analyzed but in contrast with another female figure, her white mistress? Thus, some typologies of white women in South are presented in the second chapter. The Mistress of the house, can be associated with the Victorian type of woman. She is pious and pure and inspires good deeds. She is rational, obedient of her husband and altruistic, qualities that make her become a loving wife. For Simone de Beauvoir she is "the privileged object through which he [her husband] subjected nature" (De Beauvoir 1949: 125). Another type (the Unmarried woman) is represented by the master's daughter, who by marriage helps unite her father's plantation with another, increasing his wealth. The Spinster is another character that should be mentioned when talking about white women in the South. Her counterpart, the Married woman is also there, but her presence is barely noticed. On the other hand, a Black woman's life depends exclusively on the men in her life - master and Blacks, be them husbands or not. The relationship that this woman has with her own identity oscillates between social relations and labor relations. The Civil War is discussed in this chapter and our interest is

to analyze how these women faced the war. Another important historical moment is brought to the fore and emphasizes its origins in the South: the Civil Rights Movement.

The third chapter examines in detail the Black woman who in addition to being stereotyped, may also be considered a symbol of the South, the perfect Southern slave before the war. She provides the domestic supremacy of matriarchy in the universe, she is the one who establishes and break the rules, in other words, her decisions make a difference in the kitchen and household. Her biological children are ignored or treated severely and rigidly, while white children are favored. Her character has become a standard over the years and a somewhat romanticized character in the idealized Southern memory.

The Myth of Aunt Jemima is also presented in this section, as being a "derivation" from "Mammy", the natural and original product. Jemima is circumscribed to the world of the kitchen and she alone knows many secret recipes, that she shares with the white ladies. Sanders refers to Aunt Jemima as a household product name, yet she says that this character has helped create a sense of nostalgia for the old South, where slaves were happy and felt like in a big family together with their masters and the Black community.

The texts analyzed further in chapter four are also divided into categories: a subchapter in which Mammy is presented from the perspective of the white writers, another subchapter in which the same character is approached by African American writers and a third subchapter presents Mammy in a distinct perspective, as controversial character.

The book that made Mammy famous, and that "caused this great war (Civil War)" is *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe. Through this book manifesto, Stowe managed to deepen the tensions in the society of her time presenting slavery as cruel and Uncle Tom as the most merciful slave. Therefore, Stowe's book has managed to split society in two, the abolitionists and those who promoted slavery as a very effective way of life for Blacks and whites alike. *Gone with the Wind* is already a classic text that can not be ignored when talking about Mammy. Mitchell's novel presents Mammy with all of her characteristic features so we can get a comprehensive view of her relationship with the whites.

In *The Sound and the Fury*, Dilsey is another character that confirms the stereotype. Dilsey is the African-American cook of the Compson family and a substitute mother for the children of the family. She lives with her family in a cabin on the Compson property and cares for the children of her master, and at the same time raises her own children. Despite the well-defined social role of Dilsey, she seems to be the glue that holds the family together. She is described as devoted to the family and highly religious (a stereotypical trait that is common in all the characters of this type). Both characters (Mitchell's and Faulkner's) are portrayed by white writers, so their image and stereotype can not be erased from the Southern memory. Another text that tackles the issue of women of color is *Imitation of Life* by Fannie Hurst in which Bea Pullman, a single mother and her African-American maid, Delilah Johnston, also a single mother, raise their daughters together and become business partners.

In the subchapter dealing with Mammy as seen by African American writers, Mammy is described as dissatisfied with her life on the plantation. She is no longer described in stereotypical parameters, but seen as any woman, not a kind of superhero, but a woman who needs hope and who sometimes feels overwhelmed by the life she is forced to live and can not quit after so many years spent under the same roof, following the same rules and accustomed to her humble position. This Mammy contrasts with "other" Mammies, of the whites literature. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* by Jacobs, a first-person narrative, which gives the reader an experience of life and also conveys a feeling of confession made by a fallen woman who tries to escape slavery and who manages to protect her children, being devoted to her family. The heroine is in a continuous search for freedom and independence, paving the way for emancipation for other African-American men and women.

Another text in question is *Bondswoman Narrative*, a narrative that covers the tumultuous life of its author, the main character being Hannah Crafts, who finds that her new master is an African-American who manages to pass as white. Hannah decides to leave with her owner in the North, where both can be free. The novel explores the sufferings that Hannah undergoes in her way and focuses on physical pressure and emotional torment that slaves were forced to endure in America before the war. Ishmael Reed's *Flight to Canada*, creates Uncle Robin and Mammy Barracuda as representative

characters of their class, their typology recalling the Mammy and Uncle Tom. Here Mammy Barracuda's maternal traits tend to be exaggerated in order to highlight the unrealistic image projected in the character of the Old South.

In the text *Can't Quit You Baby*, Douglas shows the friendship between two women, one black and the other one white who face hardships together and find solace in the arms of each other, the final message being important: friendship goes beyond race.

Besides these two images of the same character and their differences, there lies a third category - that of the Mammy with a rebellious personality, the African-American woman who makes her own rules and decide her own life, the woman who takes revenge on those who oppress her and who has no mercy for anyone. An example is Mark Twain's text *Roxy Pudd'nhead Wilson*. It is an example of a black slave whose skin is white, but who is considered Black because of her great-great grandparents who left one-sixteenth of black blood in her veins. She decides to change her son with the master's baby, in order to give her child a better life instead of condemning him to a life of slavery. The other Mammy character can be found in *The Conjure Woman* by Charles Waddell Chestnutt, where Aunt Peggy and Tenie are two women who are always ready to use spells against whites, in order to help the community of slaves.

The fifth chapter examines how the text is transposed on screen and cinema. The four films in question show this woman of color in all her aspects, both negative and positive. *Gone with the Wind* (1939) and *The Sound and the Fury* (1959) are two classic films that can not be ignored, in which she plays the role of a stereotypical Mammy, uniting the family through her affection to its members. She is the confidante of her mistress, substitute mother for all the white children.

In the other two films, Mammy can not escape the mental and physical dependence on a particular life style such as in *Imitation of Life* (1959) and is still differentiated and humiliated because of her race, in a world where tolerance is promoted and where the empowerment of women is at its peak as in the movie *The Help* (2011).

The conclusions approach the evolution of this complex character and how it was perceived and accepted by the mass media, with reference to the moment of glory when Vanessa Williams, was the first Black woman to win the title of Miss America in 1983. In conclusion we reinforce that there was hardly a person of importance or one who

belonged to the old aristocracy of the South who did not come under the influence of one of these slave women. One of the boasts of the "old gentlemen of the South" was that they were reared by a "Black Mammy," and they attributed certain good qualities to this influence. Nor can it be said that her influence was unfelt in the councils of the government when she held the hand of him who wrote the Declaration of Independence and rocked 'the forest-born Demosthenes' who kindled the fires of the Revolution.”
(Knight, 2002: 372.)