

# History of Mammy Stereotype

Nino GAMSAKHURDIA\*

Suraya HUSEYNOVA\*\*

## Abstract

Despite the efforts the society makes to diminish exaggerated images, stereotypes often rule our everyday interactions. The less powerful groups of societies, based on class, race, gender, and sexuality, have been forced to cope with the history which has been written for them. One of the most commonly known stereotypes, still featured in contemporary advertisements and other media, is that of the black Mammy.

**Keywords:** Mammy, stereotype, discrimination

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\* Associate Professor, Dr., Faculty of Social Sciences, Humanities and Education, International Black Sea University, Tbilisi, Georgia. E-mail: ngamsakhurdia@ibsu.edu.ge

\*\* Bachelor in Humanities, American Studies. Faculty of Social Sciences, Humanities and Education, International Black Sea University, Tbilisi, Georgia. E-mail: suraya\_guseynova@mail.ru

## Introduction

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## Mammy Stereotype

Despite the efforts the society makes to diminish exaggerated images, stereotypes often rule our everyday interactions. One of the most commonly known stereotypes, still featured in contemporary advertisements and other media, is that of the black Mammy. Characterized with her own "personal" history, this mythic female character has been portrayed as the always loyal servant to her master's family. This image of contented servitude denies the restrictions of a slave and distorts the struggle of the social "other" as a black woman attempts to gain power in a society that demeans her both because of her race and gender. The black Mammy serves as a primary example of how stereotypes are taken as fact and are unfortunately incorporated into American history. Therefore, for centuries, this image has been repeatedly modified in order to fit the interests of those in power.

The less powerful groups of societies, based on class, race, gender, and sexuality, have been forced to cope with the history which has been written for them. The "selective remembering" (Lerner, 1997, p. 205) of American history has reinforced the notion that both the histories of women and non-whites are not worth recording for future generations. The impact of women on the recording of history had to be "made from the margins, through 'influence,' not power, and through the mediation of men" (ibid. p. 207). History helps to shape and explain the world, both in the past and present, but marginal groups have been denied access to this creation. The history of women is viewed as a supplement to the history constructed by men in

power. This is similar in relation to race. The history of African Americans was largely ignored, except for those aspects that involved white men. However, even this "history" was never entirely accurate as association between these two races began through oppression and slavery. According to Patricia Morton, the black American woman has emerged from history, alongside the stereotypical images associated with her identity, as a "natural and permanent slave woman" (Morton, 1991, ix). This corresponds to the image of the enslaved black Mammy who remains tied to her white captors in advertisements and fictional images following the abolition of slavery. The appearance of loyalty on the part of the Mammy was deliberate, as advertisers and men wanting to maintain their southern business interests sought to uphold the image of a unified South. Kimberly Wallace-Sanders associates the use of the Mammy image with a "national amnesia about the history of slavery" (Wallace-Sanders 2008, p.61) in order to justify this fabricated image. According to this myth of a picturesque Dixieland, the end of the Civil War did nothing to quell the faithful servant from the sense of duty to her former master's children.

The image of the Mammy is one of the most widely known and easily recognized stereotypes in American history. First mentioned in a travel narrative in 1810, the word "mammy" has been associated with a slave woman taking care of white children for centuries (Wallace-Sanders 2008, p. 4). With many depictions featuring the Mammy with her signature wide grin and large, white, shining teeth, the Mammy portrayed the image of constant contentment, thus serving as an important symbol to past and present slave owners to avoid the suggestion of maltreatment. Usually with an obese or robust figure, the Mammy was viewed as comedic, due to her betrayal of the common standards of beauty for women with a thin frame. Also, in relation to the concept of beauty, extremely large breasts and buttocks became common physical features of the Mammy. While these features are often viewed as the physical attributes which help to attract

men, in the case of the Mammy, these features of exaggerated femininity merely helped to add to the comedic nature and encourage others to harshly critique and mock the Mammy. According to Wallace-Sander's analysis of the Mammy figure, the body of the Mammy acts as a "tendon between the races, connecting the muscle of African American slave labor with the skeletal power structure of white southern aristocracy" (ibid. p. 3). Depicted often holding or caring for the children of her white master, the Mammy was placed in the precarious position of nurturing both her own black children and their future owners.

The slavery era mammy did not want to be free. She was too busy serving as surrogate mother/grandmother to white families. Mammy was so loyal to her white family that she was often willing to risk her life to defend them. In D. W. Griffith's movie, *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) - based on Thomas Dixon's racist novel *The Clansman* (1905) - the mammy defends her white master's home against black and white Union soldiers. The message was clear: Mammy would rather fight than be free. In the famous movie *Gone With The Wind* (1939), the black mammy also fights black soldiers whom she believes to be a threat to the white mistress of the house. Mammy found life on vaudeville stages, in novels, in plays, and finally, in films and on television. White men, wearing black face makeup, did vaudeville skits as Sambos, Mammies, and other anti-black stereotypes. The standard for mammy depictions was offered by Harriet Beecher Stowe's 1852 book, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The book's mammy, Aunt Chloe, was nurturing and protective of "her" white family, but less caring toward her own children. She is the prototypical fictional mammy: self-sacrificing, fat, asexual, good-humored, a loyal cook, housekeeper and quasi family member. During the first half of the 1900s, while black Americans were demanding political, social, and economic advancement, Mammy was increasingly popular in the field of entertainment. The first talking movie was 1927's *The Jazz Singer* with Al Jolson in

blackface singing "Mammy." In 1934, the movie *Imitation of Life* told the story of a black maid, Aunt Delilah (played by Louise Beavers) who inherited a pancake recipe. This movie mammy gave the valuable recipe to Miss Bea, her boss. Miss Bea successfully marketed the recipe. She offered Aunt Delilah a twenty percent interest in the pancake company. The perspective of owning her house frightens Aunt Delilah. Aunt Delilah worked to keep the white family stable, but her own family disintegrated.

Mammy was born on the plantation in the imagination of slavery defenders, but she grew in popularity during the period of Jim Crow. The mainstreaming of Mammy was primarily, but not exclusively, the result of the fledging advertising industry. The mammy image was used to sell almost any household item, especially breakfast foods, detergents, planters, ashtrays, sewing accessories, and beverages. As early as 1875, Aunt Sally, a Mammy image, appeared on cans of baking powder. Later, different Mammy images appeared on Luzianne coffee and cleaners, Fun to Wash detergent, Aunt Dinah molasses, and other products. Mammy represented wholesomeness. You can trust the mammy pitchwoman. Mammy's most successful commercial expression was (and is) Aunt Jemima. In 1889, Charles Rutt, a Missouri newspaper editor, and Charles G. Underwood, a mill owner, developed the idea of a self-rising flour that only needed water. He called it Aunt Jemima's recipe.

According to the *New York Times*, "Quaker Oats knew that one of its major brands, Aunt Jemima, was built on racist imagery. The company inched toward fixing the problem over the years, replacing the kerchief on the Aunt Jemima character's head with a plaid headband in 1968, and adding pearl earrings and a lace collar in 1989. But it was not until Wednesday that Quaker Oats announced it would drop the Aunt Jemima name and change the packaging" (Hsu, 2020).

## Conclusion

It is evident that the traditional portrayal of Mammy looked like an obedient, loyal domestic servant, who cared more for the family members of her employer than she did for her own family; overweight and desexualized; and, most important to the portrait: not a threat to the social order.

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