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## **Black Woman as Mother in two selected novels of Alice Walker- *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* and *Meridian***

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### Abstract

*The Black woman has always been portrayed in clichéd images in the white media, stereotyping them in a racist and sexist manner. In *Black Women Image Makers*, Mary Helen Washington dwells upon such unfair portrayals as the tragic mulatto, the hot blooded exotic whore and the strong Black Mammy. And this is probably why the black mother frequently appears in literature as a figure of towering strength.*

*In Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), an old grandmother, a former slave, accurately describes her position in this society: "De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see". The black mother is not a woman with power, not a liberated woman, but a mule, picking up the burdens that everyone else has thrown down and refused to carry. To outsiders, the Negro mother appears to be the one-dimensional Rock of Gibraltar – strong of back, long of arm, incapable of destruction.*

*The proposed paper would study the black mothers as portrayed in Alice Walker's novels, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* and *Meridian*. To Walker, the Black mother is an individual – profound, tragic, mysterious, sacred, and unfathomable – strong in many, but not in all ways. She claims that the assertion of the black mother as a superwoman is a myth, and she feels that the black mother isn't always strong. A black man does have a history of ignoring his responsibilities, but the black mother has had no choice in any matter; she has had to pick up the burdens that no one else would carry. In her fiction, Walker introduces the real-feeling, caring, uncaring, disappointed, indifferent black mother to the world.*

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The black mother frequently appears in literature as a figure of towering strength-- the one-dimensional Rock of Gibraltar--strong of back, long of arm,

incapable of destruction. Mary Helen Washington, in *Their Fiction Becomes Our Reality: Black Women Image Makers* dwells on the clichéd images of



Black women in the white media, which has catalogued in great detail such sexist and racist stereotypes as the tragic mulatto, the hot blooded exotic whore and the strong Black Mammy (10).

In *Southern Mothers*, Nagueyalti Warren explains that post-Civil War, numerous Black women adopted the cult of True Womanhood ideal that white women were busy discarding—one which required them to be innately maternal, ever loving and supportive. She notes that slavery had denied Black women “those very customs [white women were attacking], for they had not been lady-mothers but mammies, not housewives of their own homes but servants or slaves in the master’s mansion” (184). She asserts, “African American [women] writers often create mothers who are superwomen: self-sacrificing, long-suffering, all-powerful figures...” (182).

Stephen Henderson notes, however, that as the twentieth century progressed, Black women writers increasingly began “free[ing] themselves from the roles assigned to them in the writings of their male counterparts, where, depicted as queens and princesses, or as earth mothers and idealized Black Mommas of superhuman wisdom and strength, they were unrecognizable as individuals” (xxiv).

In her study *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (1979), Michele Wallace said that the superwoman stereotype remains a strong tradition from which very few Black female authors have strayed. Alice Walker quotes Wallace in *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens* (1984) taking strong exception to it. “It’s a lie,” Walker maintains, “I’ve been hacking away at that stereotype for years, and so have many other black women writers” (324). The black mother is not a woman

with power, not a liberated woman, but a mule, picking up the burdens that everyone else has thrown down and refused to carry. Walker lists many of the dominant stereotypes that have been applied to Black women since slavery-- “Matriarchs,” “Superwomen,” “Mean and Evil Bitches” “Castraters” and “Sapphire’s Mama” including the, perhaps, most damaging one to their psyches: the Black superwoman myth, which draws from other stereotypes to form immense social and personal barriers for Black women.

To Walker, the Black mother is an individual—profound, tragic, mysterious, sacred, and unfathomable—strong in many, not all ways. Before examining the mother characters in the fiction of Alice Walker, one must try to understand why the myth of the invincible black mother was conceived in the first place. It has been observed that the lack of attention given to black women writers has contributed to this myth. Another explanation of this myth is given by Booke Battles Taylor in a study she wrote in 1971 explaining society’s mythical conception of the Negro mother:

The black woman’s character and personality have been formed largely as a result of the negative status and ego given her man. What he cannot be, because of forces he cannot control, she has had to be; she must fill the gaps, and the society allows and encourages her to do so. The Negro woman’s fulfilment of the black man’s economic and parental duties brings a further disintegration of his status and self- esteem, and he gives up a few more duties and moral responsibilities, adding momentum to a circular pattern.



The Negro man, battered by the white majority and outdone by his wife, steps to the background or disappears completely, and the woman assumes the power and leadership that he relinquishes. Such leadership makes her strong, her strength alienates her from Negro men, and her relationship with her children becomes all-encompassing (16-17).

Taylor views the Black mother as strong and concludes that the myth is not a myth at all; in reality, she is always strong.

Walker claims that this assertion is purely myth, and that the black mother is not always strong. Her man has a history of ignoring his responsibilities, but Walker says that the black mother has had no choice in the matter. That she had picked up these burdens does not mean that she wanted to do it or even that she liked what she was doing. Walker, in her fiction, introduces the real black mother to the world--feeling, caring, uncaring, disappointed and indifferent.

In her first novel *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, Walker creates three mother figures, each portraying a particular type of strength. Margaret Copeland, the first mother figure introduced to the reader, is the wife of sharecropper, Grange. In the words of Bettye J. Parker-Smith, "Margaret was unable to make choices about her life and was unaware that possibilities for change existed"(480). Drained of emotion by her disastrous marriage, disgusting job and duties at home, Margaret is lonely and is not capable of showing her son Brownfield any love and affection. Her state of mind degenerates further by the time her other son Star is born.

The reader learns of Margaret's life through the eyes of Brownfield who observes that "his mother was like their dog in some ways"(5). Through Brownfield's description of his mother's illegitimate baby Star- that the baby allowed itself to be dragged and was always treated indifferently- one can see that Margaret is not the strong mythical black mother. When Grange finally deserts Margaret and her two children, she no longer has the strength to cope with life and ends up poisoning herself and her little child.

Unlike Margaret, Brownfield's wife Mem who is the second mother figure Walker introduces, resembles the strong mythical black mother. However, she too suffers, and has a breaking point. With an uncanny ability to keep dreaming about a better future, Mem tries to fill both the emotional and physical needs of her children. After their initial years together, Brownfield starts taking out his frustrations on Mem and their children but "the worse he treated her, the more she was compelled to save him", as Bettye J. Parker-Smith observes (482).

Mem refuses to let her husband think that he has crushed her spirit and promises him she "ain't going to die" when he drags her to live in a shack (142). Here, she "dispiritedly" throws flower seeds in the yard (149). Previously, she has always planted seeds in boxes and beds, no matter how shabby their house was. This attitude is symbolic of her strength slipping. The final proof that Mem's strength is completely gone is found in Walker's description of Mem's murder, which could be considered a suicide, like Margaret's death. Seeing her armed, drunken husband, Mem walks calmly towards him only to get killed. She, like Margaret, reaches the limit of her self-



sacrificing maternal instinct, and death looks more inviting than life in the future. Warren says, "Alice Walker's fictional mothers are powerless and ineffectual. From her first novel to last Walker renders black motherhood in an iconoclastic light. In *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, motherhood traps and thoroughly oppresses Mem by turning her into a 'plodding cow'." (185)

Unlike Margaret and Mem, Josie, the third mother figure in the novel, cannot be described as self-sacrificing, at least not for her daughter's sake. Greedy, calculating and amoral, Josie is devoid of the slightest maternal feeling for her daughter Lorene, who is nothing but a burden for her-- a chain round her neck that she wanted to dump. Josie does not try to fill her daughter's emotional or physical needs; she merely allows the latter to exist.

These mother figures do not prepare the reader for the two mother figures in Walker's second novel, *Meridian*. The novel, a story about a young black girl, Meridian Hill, caught up in the Civil Rights Movement of the sixties, introduces the reader to Meridian and her mother, Mrs. Hill. The latter does not want children, but because of tradition, she raises them. Meridian confesses that she feels guilty for "stealing her mother's serenity, for shattering her mother's emerging self... though she was unable to understand how this could possibly be her fault"(43). The conflict that arises between both is symbolic of tradition clashing with modern ways.

Mrs Hill, driven by maternal self-sacrifice is not the jolly, strong, mythical black mother. She resists being a mother by giving birth to children and then relinquishing her responsibility to mother them. Before the birth of her baby, Meridian realizes she does not

want it and after its birth, her dreams of ways to murder him express her repressed resistance. The demands of mothering, the gasping and screaming infant, who robs her of her sleep, remind her of slavery and to Meridian the child feels like "a ball and chain"(65). She hears her own voice that cursed her existence and the psychological toll is immense, as she feels she has failed to uphold the tradition established by her ancestors. The decision of giving away her child is the first step Meridian takes in search of her identity but nightmares begin to trouble her sleep and she is consigned to penitence for life.

According to Gloria Wade-Gayles, 'The Happy Mother' a chapter in the novel, typifies Walker's attack on the popular belief that, "because women are biologically capable of bearing children," they all look to motherhood for fulfilment in life (quoted in Warren 187). Walker uses her characters to show that the experience of motherhood in a patriarchal and white-dominated culture is a challenge some women should not accept, a point she makes explicit with the statement that Mrs Hill "was not a woman who should have had children" (39). Implicit in this chapter is Walker's insistence on freedom and choice for women. Motherhood to Mrs. Hill is a burden which represents the loss of her teaching position and more importantly, herself. In her case it is not poverty or an abusive husband which conspire to cause the black woman's misery; it is her conformity to the behaviour of other black women. Mrs. Hill cannot forgive the people around her for not "warning her against children" (41).

Through the various mother characters Walker has created, the reader can see beyond the outer image which so often stereotypes the black mother. Instead of attempting directly to dispel



the black mother myth; Walker depends on the reader to comprehend the black mothers' strength and weaknesses. In characters such as Margaret, Mem, and Mrs. Hill, the reader gets a glimpse of the strong black mother. However, both Margaret and Mem allow the men in their lives to crush their spirits so that they are not able to continue to cope with life any longer and they purposely end their self-sacrificing lives.

The idea of the black mother not wanting her child is further revealed through characters such as Josie and Meridian. Walker informs her reader that not only do black mothers often fall short of the stereotyped mother who sustains the family through anything, but also that black mothers even, at times, give their children away. The fact that some of the mothers have selfish motives for renouncing their children or having abortions further dispels the myth. Walker's mother figures are women involved in a struggle just to survive.

In all of the mother figures examined, the reader can spot a common flaw. Regardless of their strengths or weaknesses, these mother figures all try to be what their men and their race expect of them, rather than what they want to be. Gail Griffin states, "in a culture that idealizes motherhood but holds real mothers in contempt, women

know only too well how near impossible it is to enact Mother but elicit the respect accorded to Father" (quoted in Warren 1-2).

Barbara Christian adds, "In principle, society places motherhood on a pedestal, while, in reality, it rejects individual mothers as human beings with needs and desires.... this double-edged dilemma is heightened for black women" (220). Meridian, the female protagonist of *Meridian*, renounces this restrictive biological role of motherhood and participates in the larger social and political life of her society.

Walker depicts the black mother as a woman faced with harsh responsibilities which she either accepts or denies. When mothers such as Margaret and Mem can no longer bear these severe circumstances, they choose to die, passing these responsibilities to aunts, grandmothers and mothers. These women pick up the unwanted burdens, and, accordingly, the cycle starts over again. The reader sees in these mother figures not the one-dimensional Rock of Gibraltar but women struggling to survive. What comes across in these works is that, in spite of odds and stumbling blocks, Walker's women emerge with beauty and strength, talent and genius, on the canvas of life; undeterred, dauntless.



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