



A Study of Black Women's Life in Alice Walker's The Third Life of Grange Copeland

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Abstract

The Third Life of Grange Copeland is a powerful story about three generations of black family. Alice Walker makes clear that her fear and the fears of black women. Alice Walker depicts the all injustice against black women. Alice Walker's portrayal of women characters in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* reveals strange ambivalences and ambiguities. Thus in all aspects Alice Walker in her very first novel *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* successfully emerges as the spokeswoman of the oppressed black women community of America. She has powerfully exposed the historicism behind the legendary racism and sexism to which Black American women had to fall a prey.

Index Term:

Fear –strange ambivalences and ambiguity- racism- sexism –victim- emerging

Introduction

Alice Walker's first novel *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* is a powerful story about three generations of black family in rural Georgia. This novel has heroes and villains. The villains are those who have a genius to hate but no capacity for love. The heroes acquire the ability to care deeply for another white human being. Brownfield Copeland, whose mother kills herself in despair when his father abandons her, grows up hanging and un-loved. Alice Walker skillfully depicts Brownfield turning into murderous whining beast. Her sympathy is mainly with his wife and with all black women whom she sees as victims of both whites and their own husband's rage. According to Alice Walker, women are not broken by poverty but impact of poverty is so heavy on Brownfield's inner life, or the psychic starvation that makes him so unable to love. Brownfield appears to have an intense self-hatred and to him black is anything but beautiful.

So naturally, Alice Walker's women are in love and trouble but they are not silent. Her women are not presented through a perceptive male narrator but through the private voices of their imaginations or through their dearly paid for words or acts. In her famous book *Black Feminist Criticism*, Barbara Christian makes a pointed observation regarding Alice Walker's art of characterization. She observes thus:

The way in which Alice Walker uses her point of view is not more technique, but an indication of how her protagonists are to be, themselves within the constraints of convention. If they cannot act, they speak. If they cannot speak, they can at least imagine, their interiority being violated, a place where they can exercise autonomy, be who they are. Through act, word, or dream, they naturally seek to be “characteristically and spontaneously” themselves. So their personal spirits are troubled as they strain against their restraints. And their acts, words, dreams take on the appearance, if not of madness, of contrariness... (34)

Alice Walker is basically a story teller. As a black woman from the farm lands of Georgia, Alice Walker knows her countryside very well. She is very much familiar with cabins, far out of just about every one's sight, where one encounters the habits of diet, the idioms of speech, the styles of clothing, the ways of prayer that contrast so strikingly with the customs of the people there. Fearful and vulnerable, rural blacks and whites too can at the same time be exuberant, passionate, quick-witted and as smartly self-displaying as well educated.

She knows beyond that what bounty sharecroppers must hand over to “boss men” and how tenant farmers struggle with their landlords, and how poor farmers barely get by. But she does not exhort. In *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* the centuries of black life in America are virtually engraved on one's consciousness. Equally vivid in Grange Copeland, who is more than a representative of Georgia's black field hands, more than someone scared by what has been called the mark of oppression. In him, Alice Walker has turned dry sociological facts into a whole and alive particular person rather than a bundle of problems and attitudes

It can be said that *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* is concerned with the direction a suffering people can take. His first life ends in flight, and his wondering son takes flight too, becoming finally a ruined man bent on undermining everyone who feels worthwhile and has a sense of pride and dignity. For a while, the lives of father and son converge on the establishment run by Josie, a sensual, canny, generous, possessive madam whose café and “rooms” full of women feed off the frustrations men like Grange and Brownfield try to subdue. There are complications, accidents, sudden and surprising developments. There is always the unpredictable and potentially violent atmosphere of the small ‘Georgia town.

Grange's second life in Harlem is equally disastrous. He becomes slick, manipulative, unfeeling man. The world is shocked to find and quick to condemn – yet not wholly unfeeling. He tries to help a white woman in distress and is rebuffed. His hatred of white presses more relentlessly and so he goes to South to find escape from them at any cost. Josie is waiting for him. Brownfield has married her niece, a charming girl, “above” her husband in intelligence and education and sensitivity, but step-by-step he goes down, systematically destroying his wife and daughters. Yet Grange finds at last in his third life, as an exile returned home – the freedom he has asked for. The whites are everywhere still powerful, so it is not political and economic freedom he achieves. But he does take care of his son's youngest daughter after her mother is killed by her drunken husband, and, finally he speaks thus to his beloved grand-daughter.

I know the danger of all the blame on somebody else for the mess you make out of your life. I fell into the trap myself. And I'm bound of to believe that that's the way the white folks can corrupt you even when you done held up before. ‘Cause when they got you thinking that they're to blame for everything they have you thinking they are some kind of gods...(111)

Brownfield tries to get his daughter back, and prevent that Grange kills him. What goes on between that daughters, that growing child, and her grandfather is told with particular grace. It is as if one were reading a long and touching poem. But Alice Walker is a fighter as well as a meditative poet and a lyrical novelist. She has taken part in the struggles her people have waged and she knows the struggle they must yet face in this greatest of the world's democracies.

She also knows that not even ample bread and wine or power and the applause of one's countrymen can give one's worth. Toward the end of his third life, Grange Copeland can at last stop being hard on him and look with kindness upon himself and one wonders whether any achievement can be more revolutionary. It is worth remembering at this context the succinct assessment of the craft of Alice Walker made by Mary

Helen Washington in her essay, “An Essay on Alice Walker” appeared in **Alice Walker: Critical perspective past and present**. She observes thus:

From whatever vantage point one investigates the works of Alice Walker – poet, novelist, short story writer, critic, essayist, and apologist for black women. It is clear that the special identifying mark of her writing is concern for the live of black women her main preoccupation has been the souls of black women. Alice Walker herself, writing about herself as writer has declared herself committed to “exploring the oppressions, the insanity’s, the loyalties, and the triumphs of black women’. In her first four published works – *Once*, her earliest book of poetry; *Revolutionary Petunias*; The *Third Life of Grange Copeland*, her first novel; *In Love and Trouble*, a collection of thirteen stories – and her latest novel, *Meridian*, there are more than twenty-five characters from the slave woman to a revolutionary woman of the sixties. Within each of these roles Alice Walker has examined the external realities facing these woman as well as the intend world of each woman...(37).

One should begin to understand Alice Walker, the apologist and spokeswoman for black women, by understanding the motivation for Alice Walker’s preoccupation with her subject. Obviously there is simply a personal identification. Alice Walker says thus in her interview with John O’ Brien:

I believe in listening – to a person, the sea, the wind, the tree, but especially to young black women whose rocky road, I am still traveling ... (211)

Moreover her sense of personal identification with black women includes a sense of sharing in their peculiar oppression. Alice Walker always speaks of her own awareness of and experiences with brutality and violence in the lives of black woman, many of whom she had known as a girl growing up in Eatonton, Georgia, some in her own family. The recurrent theme running throughout that interview and in much of her other works on woman is her belief that black women are the most oppressed people in the world.

Raising an axe, crying out in child birth or abortion, surrendering to a man who is oblivious to her real name – these are the kinds of images which most often appear in Alice Walker’s own writing and have prompted critic Carolyn Fowler to observe that Alice Walker has the true gift of revealing the authentic “Heart of Woman” in her stories. What particularly distinguishes Alice Walker in her role as an apologist and chronicler for black woman is her evolutionary treatment of black women. She perceives the experience of black women as a series of movements from woman totally victimized by society and by the men in their lives to the growing developing women whole consciousness allows them to have control over their lives.

In historical terms the women of the first cycle belong to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and the early decades of the twentieth century. The institution of slavery set up the conditions and environment for the period immediately following, extending from the end of the reconstruction era to the first two decades of the twentieth century. Borrowing the term first used by novelist Zora Neale Hurston, the black women of this period are “the mules of the world” carrying the burdens upon them by society and by the family, the victims of both racial and sexual oppression. Alice Walker calls them her, “suspended” women; a concept she develops in an important historical essay entitled “In Search of our mother’s Gardens: The Creativity of the Black Woman in the South”, published in *Ms*.Magazine in May 1974. Alice Walker explains this state of suspension in her interview with Mary Helen Washington as caused by pressures in society which made it impossible for the black women of this era to move forward:

They were suspended in a time in history where the options of Black women were severely limited. And either kills themselves or they are used up by the man, or by the children, or by... whatever the pressures against them. And they cannot go anywhere, I mean, you can’t you just can’t move, until there is room for you to move in to. And that’s the way I see many of the women I have created in fiction. They are close to my mother’s generation than to mine. They’ had few choices...(6).

Suspended in time and place by a country, an era that only acknowledged them as laborers, these women were simply defeated in one way or another by the external circumstances of their lives. For such were women - the great - grandmothers of the black women of contemporary times – pain, violence, poverty and oppression were the essential context of their lives. Writer June Jordan calls them “black-eyed Susans-

Flowers of the blood – soaked in American Soil”. Most of Alice Walker’s women characters belong to the first part of the cycle – the suspended woman.

In Alice Walker’s *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, three women cruelly exploited, spirits and bodies mutilated, relegated to the most narrow and confining lives, sometimes driven to madness.

Alice Walker’s first novel *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* exposes the pattern of terror over a span of sixty years in the lives of one black family of sharecroppers. Grange Copeland abuses his wife, Margaret, and neglects his own son Brownfield because he feels himself less than a man in a land where his entire life is indebted to the white boss. As he grows older, he feels trapped by his family for they hold him to this life. Increasingly, he feels quit because he can neither protect his wife from the white arms of Shipley nor makes possible a better life for his son. As he drinks solace from the overflowing breasts and the bar of Josie, the local whore, Margaret takes on lives reacting to Grange’s abuse by abusing herself. When her husband leaves his life of indebtedness for the North, Margaret poisons herself and her young and illegitimate baby.

Deserted by his parents, Brownfield, a young man of sixteen follows his father’s path only to end up working for and sleeping with Josie. While he is employed at the Dew Drop Inn, Brownfield meets and falls in love with Mem, Josie’s school teacher’s niece. In love and passion, they marry only to repeat the pattern of depression and abuse Grange and Margaret had already drawn. In spite of Mem’s efforts to better her life and lives of her daughter Daphne, Ornette and Ruth, Brownfield drags her down feeling less than a man, the two buries himself in Josie only to loss even her to the father who deserted own.

Alice Walker describes the story of Brownfield and Mem’s deterioration. In revenge for his father’s rejection, Brownfield kills his newborn albino son, a white baby that looks his father. In moment of terrible strength Mem threatens her husband with gun and tears his defenses apart. In a clear drunken mood, after years of mangling guilt and self-hatred, Brownfield murders Mem, leaving his own children, as his father had done before him.

Grange, who has returned from the north takes on the responsibility of raising Ruth, his youngest grand child with the same vigor that ‘he had shunned the responsibility of raising his own son. Ruth in her innocence gives Grange a new life.

Thus the story is marked throughout by the motif of physical and spiritual murder by suicide and infanticide, by wife beating and killing set against a background of the horror of racism in the South. The pervasive pattern of this guilt is kin killing. None of the woman characters in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* seem to be happy or made happy by their man. In fact, the cruelty and fortune are conflicted on them only by their men. The pain and pangs of women character, like Margaret, Mem, Daphne, Ornette and Ruth are self-enforced rather than they are brought about by the outside forces.

Commenting on the structure of *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* Barbara Christian in her research article, “Novels for Everyday Use” appears in the book *Alice Walker: Critical Perspectives Past and Present* observes thus:

Because Alice Walker covers three generations of the Copeland family, she is able to show us how consistent and deep-rooted this strategy of racism is. By having one figure, the figures of Grange Copeland, persist throughout this generational span, Alice Walker dramatizes the possibilities of change. Throughout the eleven economical sections of this novel, however the author refuses to let her readers forget society’s insistent, often solid, attempt to control the psychological as well as the material conditions under which black people struggle. She graphically lays out her patterns by tracing in the first half of the novel degenerate effects of racism on the Copeland and by demonstrating the process of regeneration in the second half. Two elements, then the need to accept responsibility, for one’s life for self-definition and the obvious fact that much of it at last in this time and place, is beyond one’s control from the axis of the novel’s cyclical patterns. This novel poses the question. In the grip of physical and psychological

oppression, “how do you find a place in you where they can’t come?” How do you hold unto self-love?..(54-55).

Then the obvious answer to this question is to go somewhere else. The land of North is a dream of hope for the Copeland men. But this hope results in Grange deserting Margaret. Alice Walker describes the monotony of life in the South Georgia thus:

On Saturday afternoon – Grange shaved bathed, put on clean overalls and a shirt and took the wagon into town to buy groceries. While he was away his wife washed and straightened her hair. She dressed up and sat, all shining and pretty, in the open door hoping anxiously for visitors who never came. (14)

Both Grange and Brownfield marry sweet, virginal women who had had a girlhood brimming with hope. Margaret and Mem at first believe as do their husbands that through love, kindness, fortitude and orderliness, they can create and maintain a good home. The wives are programmed to be demure, pretty to plant flowers and be chaste. If they do these things well, they believe they will receive their rewards. Because they believe in the definition of women dictated by society, neither Margaret nor Mem is emotionally prepared to understand, for less hope with, their reality. So when the rewards do not materialize when in fact they are abused and blamed by their men for their failure, the wives believe that they have not done their part well.

Alice Walker calls up the other side of that strong black woman’s image, as well as the reason why it is emphasized so much in American mythology. That image is necessary because so many black women like Margaret and Mem, have been crushed and utterly destroyed precisely because they are black and because they are women. Their blood flushes the Copeland guilt with the colours of violent death and with the threads of degeneration. Now the children are left to tend for themselves in a world that will naturally abuse them. Margaret and Mem are examples of Alice Walker’s first generation of black women, the most abused of the abused. It is important to note that these women are destroyed when they begin to gather strength or to rebel.

Just as their husbands are defeated by internal as well as external disorders, both Margaret and Mem are destroyed not only by their husbands and their society but their stupid belief that kindness can convert the enemy. They have tried to be women in the traditional Southern Christian sense. Margaret tried to arouse Grange by abusing herself and Mem believes that she can give her own strength and rewards to Brownfield. Even as they rebel, these women live and die with their husbands rather than deserting them.

Fat Josie is another important woman character in *Third Life of Grange Copeland* besides Margaret and Mem. Josie is the one black woman in the book who is neither virginal nor wifely and who does not depend on a man for her financial needs. In fact her profession feeds on the despair of the men around her. Josie’s life is another example of the way in which society’s definition of woman and man conflict with one another.

At the age of sixteen Josie becomes a whore because her father rejects her when she becomes pregnant. In an attempt, to win back his love she used her body, her only asset to earn money to buy him gifts. Alice Walker’s presentation of young Josie’s fall as a woman is marked by her analysis of the difference between society’s view of her lovers who are encouraged to express their manhood through their sexuality and it’s punishment of the woman who succumbs to them. Even though the young Josie is expected to attract men through her body. She is also expected to be a virgin punishment.

Ironically, Josie, the whore represents the continuing thread of various generations of Copeland. As a whore, she is indispensable to the system of sexual and racial conflict within which the frustrated husbands and the anguished wives suffer. She is both Grange and Brownfield’s and finally Brownfield’s co-conspirator. She feels Margaret has taken Grange away from her and hates her. Since Mem is her niece, it is through her that Brownfield meets the budding school girl. But Josie is also angry at Mem for taking Brownfield away from her and feels obligated to wreck his marriage. Years later, Josie the fat whore is

replaced by Ruth Copeland, her innocent step grand-daughter in Grange's affections if there is any character in this novel who finds her way into the upwards of all the principles, it is Josie.

Ruth, who is the focus of the second half of the book, is born at the same time in the midst of degeneration and regeneration. From her birth, Brownfield does not relate to her as a father. The fate of every black American woman afflicts Ruth even from her childhood days. Her mother delivers her herself because of her father is too drunk to get the midwife. Grange rather than Brownfield takes on the responsibility of the father mainly because he feels guilt about his neglect of his own son.

But Ruth will not believe that white folks killed her mother, for she had seen her father do it more than anything. She wants to understand how her father got the way he did. She turned her father's image over and over in her mind as if he has a great conundrum. In her innocence she knows what she had seen but cannot comprehend its complexity. She can not forgive her father for killing her mother even if she understands the world's cruelty. So she might survive and she at her young age wants to know love so she can be whole. Even as Grange instructs his grand daughter in the ways of the cruel world and in understanding how racism affects her life. Ruth's love and her questions load him into self-examination and reflection.

The structure of the first half of the novel continues with the second, for although the pattern of Ruth and Grange's life together is new, Brownfield's pattern remains the same. The chapters in which Grange and Ruth are transforming their souls set next to sections in which Brownfield, along with Josie, Grange's now-neglected wife, conspire against his family, like a ragged but necessary piece of cloth. Brownfield's schemes to hunt Grange interrupt the new pattern.

Grange kills his only son Brownfield in the presence of the white judge in order to save his grand daughter Ruth. He spills the blood of his son to save his granddaughter. The Sheriff's men follow him to the home and there they kill him.

It is a fact that Grange's bloody act is necessary for the survival of youth. Yet in killing Brownfield and himself Grange has left Ruth alone. But the end of the novel raises a question whether Ruth can avoid the unworkable definition of woman by which her mother and her grandfather were trapped. Thus Ruth becomes a third generation victim of the racist fabric of the South. Margaret, Mem, and Ruth are the victims of the injustices in their society.

In *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* Alice Walker lays out, arranges and examines bits and pieces of hatred in the lives of the Copeland, so one might see the overall design. Her use of thirty units, much like the compression of poetry, enables her economically to develop her overall design. So the major elements could be clearly seen and intensely felt. By using these same elements to create a new pattern, she suggests that the pain in life must be understood and used, if the new pattern is to endure. In an interview with Claudia Tate in *Black Women Writers* Alice Walker describes, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* thus: .. a novel that is chronological in structure, or more devoted, more or less to rigorous realism... (176)

The main theme of this novel subordinates as domestic violence dominates. Individual scenes record Brownfield's increasing brutality. Mem is beaten and dehumanized. The children Daphne, Ornette and Ruth live in constant fear of their father. It causes the gradual physical and moral destruction of Mem. The focus on Mem as a victim of brutality and the responses of her children to that brutal treatment mark a move away from the original ideological purpose. The novel moves from Brownfield as victim to the women and children as the most victimized.

Alice Walker's portrayal of women characters in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* reveals strange ambivalences and ambiguities. Margaret's life solely seen through the eyes of Brownfield as a child leaves these ambiguities largely unresolved. Mem, although more directly represented has her life viewed largely with the context of the abuse she suffers in her marriage to Brownfield. The most problematic representation is that of another female character, Josie. Alice Walker at times sympathetic to Josie and at times not.

All three women characters are part of the larger design of the novel and however their individuality is suppressed. Margaret is largely delineated within the initial Grange – Brownfield narrative. Mem emerges not as a specific woman but as a repository of various traits and virtues. Mem is totally different from other women characters in this novel because of her formal education, her physical attractiveness and her assertive approach to life. In spite of her personal qualification, she suffers at the hands of Brownfield.

The women in this cycle are also victims, not of physical violence, but of a kind of psychic violence that alienates them from their roots, cutting them off from real contact. The women of the second cycle are destroyed spiritually rather than physically and yet there is still some movement forward, some hope that did not exist for the earlier generation of American Black women. The women in the cycle are more aware of this condition and they have greater potential for shaping their lives, although they are still thwarted because they feel themselves coming to life before the necessary changes have been made in the political environment – before there is space for them to move into. Mem of *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* belongs to this category of Black Women. She is educated, polished and a woman of cultured behavior. Yet she becomes a toy – thing in the hands of Brownfield.

The sense of “Double Consciousness” that Du Bois spoke of in *The Souls of Black Folk* is perhaps most evident in the lives of these women. They are the most aware of and burdened by the “double consciousness” that makes one measure one’s soul by the tape of the other world. In June, 1973 in an interview with Mary Helen Washington, Alice Walker speaks thus about the direction and development of her black women characters:

My Women, in the future, will not burn themselves up that’s what I mean by coming to the end of a cycle, and understanding something to the end... now I am ready to look at women who have made the room larger for others to move in ... I think one reason I never stay away from the Southern Movement is because I realize how deeply political changes affect the choices and life style of people. The movement of the sixties, Black power, the Muslims, the panthers... have changed the options of Black people generally and of Black women on particular. So that my women characters won’t all end the way they have been, because black women now offer varied, live models of how it is possible to live. We have made a new place to move... (2)

The women of the third cycle for the most part, women of the late sixties who exhibit the qualities of the developing, emergent model. Greatly influenced by the political events of the sixties and the changes resulting from the freedom movement, they are women coming just to the edge of a new awareness and making the first tentative steps into an uncharted region. Even though they are more fully conscious of their political and psychological oppression and more capable of creating new options for themselves, they must undergo a harsh limitation before they are ready to occupy and claim any new territory.

Alice Walker is herself a real life prototype of the emergent black woman, speaks of having been caused to life by the Civil Rights Movement of Sixties. It is as being called from the shadows of a world in which black people existed as statistics problems, beast of burden, a life that resembled death for the reason that one was not aware of the possibilities within one’s self or possibilities in the larger world outside of the narrow restraints of the world black people inhabited before the struggle of the sixties. When Alice Walker and civil rights activities like Fennie Lou Hamer’s case widowed and made homeless, but they never lost the energy and courage for revolt. In the same way Alice Walker’s own characters through suffering and struggle. It is full of laid the ground work for a new movement in the type of new women to emerge.

The process of cyclical movement in the lives of Alice Walker’s black woman is first, evident of Mem Copeland and the granddaughter of Margaret Copeland, the two women whose lives were lived out under the most extreme form of oppression. These two women certainly represent Alice Walker’s first two cycles of the suspended – Black Women. Under the pressures of poverty and alienation from her husband, Margaret kills herself and her child. Mem, wife of Brownfield Copeland is brutally murdered by her husband in one of his drunken rages, Ruth is brought up by her grandfather Grange, he in his “Third life” attempts to salvage some of his own wasted life of protecting Ruth.

Ruth emerges into a young woman at the same time as the Civil Right movement, and there is just a glimpse at the end of the novel how that movement will affect Ruth's life. She becomes more aware of the political trends by watching the civil rights activities both women and men and their struggle against the abuses of oppression. Thus in all aspects Alice Walker in her very first novel *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* successfully emerges as the spokeswoman of the oppressed black women community of America. She has powerfully exposed the historicism behind the legendary racism and sexism to which Black American women had to fall a prey.

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