

Alice Walker's Perspective of Empowerment of Black Women as Revealed in her Novel "The Third Life of Grange Copeland"

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Alice Walker is a Black American novelist, essayist, short story writer, poetic, critic, biographer, editor and *Pulitzer Prize* laureate. Alice Walker captures the experience of Black women in her works as a series of movements from women who are victimized by the society to women who have taken control of their lives consciously. She has explored the lives of Black women in depth even questions their fate. She has courage to see through the seeds of time and declares that in future black women would no longer live in suspension. "*The Third Life of Grange Copeland*" (1970) was the first novel of Alice Walker. The focus is on Black women characters in *The Third Life* who empower themselves through education and economic independence. This novel introduces the domination of powerless women by equally powerless men. The novel challenges African Americans to take a scrutinizing look at them. Mary Margaret Richards observes that "The Oldest generation represented by Grange finds itself trapped in a share cropper system... a form of slavery (*African –American Writers, p.744*). The novel introduces many of her prevalent themes, particularly the domination of powerless women by equally powerless men.

In this work which spans the years between the depression and the beginnings of the civil right movements in the early 1960's , Walker chronicled three generations of a black share cropping family and explored the effects of poverty and racism on their lives. Because of his sense of failure Grange Copeland, the family patriarch, drives his wife to suicide and abandons his children to seek a better life in the North. His legacy of hate and violence is passed on to his son, Brownfield, who eventually murders his wife. In the end, he attempts to atone for his past transgression with the help of his granddaughter, Ruth. For Grange, Ruth symbolizes hope because she has survived the Copeland's history of brutality and despair. "While some reviewer accused walker of reviving stereotypes about the dysfunctional black family, others praised her use of intensive descriptive language" (*Contemporary Literary Criticism* 402).

"*The Third Life of Grange Copeland*" has four main women characters. Margret Copeland, Mem, Jesie and Ruth. Margaret Copeland is a slave who is sexually abused and exploited by both white and black men. Josie is a prostitute who abducts men for her sexual appetite. Mem, an empowered character, is a well-educated teacher- Ruth, the granddaughter of Grange and daughter of Brownfield, offers her comments on the characters in the novel. Walker offers an intimate portrait and a panoramic survey of racism in American from the black point of view. The success of the novel derives from her ability to portray the conditions of the blacks which are absolutely inescapable. Walker reflects the nuances of relationship between men and women through folk culture. Freedom of Blacks is interlinked with that of black women. *Nickson* observes that this novel reveals "the violent racist system of the south and its impact on the black family" (*African American women, A Biographical Dictionary*, p.529). This shows that blacks can empower themselves only when they overcome the racist system created by whites. *Elizabeth Brown-Guillory* observes that in this novel "Walker's vision about women and their

mothers” is well depicted. Black women often find themselves in the harsh environment they are physically psychologically and spiritually attacked by men. They can soar by finding in their women’s garden the root that can bind, nurture guide and sustain them. This tells how black women can perform the duties that will nurture the whole black community.

Walker has also explored how the masculine thrust in the African-American society manifests itself in the form of power and acquisition. Though she is criticized for writing mostly about the negative behavior of men against women in her novels, she has won appreciation also. While commenting on mothers in her novel, *Barbara T. Christian* says that black mothers in society are not always given respect like white mothers. They want to be victorious like whites. *Calvin C. Hernton* says that black men beat black women for being “Ugly” since they cannot beat or attack their brutal white masters. If they do that, they will be even awarded death punishment in courts. Black women have to fight against both white and black oppressors in this place of work where they are sexually and physically abused by men. The social set up of the society has changed the minds of black men to be brutal against Black women because they are unable to fight the suppressors. They beat their women who will accept it as their fate. Grange and Brownfield beat their wives since they cannot retaliate against white brutality. This brutal nature has mingled in their consciousness through generations. Brownfield is the son of Grange Copeland and Margaret Copeland and the second generation is primarily represented by him. Brownfield experiences the form of slavery imposed on his parents in the share-cropping business.

Sexual abuse, ill treatment and violence within the black family and community are described in this novel. Brownfield after murdering his wife Mem goes to jail. There he reads about his trial in a tabloid. *Mary Margaret Richard* says that he realizes that he has learned

“to read and write” (748) from Mem. Here the novel shows how Black women try to educate the illiterate. *Winchell states that Mem” Believes too fully” (47)* a man unworthy of trust (Brownfield). After three years of their marriage they have two children. Brownfield ignores his children but Mem cares about their studies and their status in society. But she is “good for him (Brownfield)”. *The Third Life of Grange Copeland (50)*, which suggests though Brownfield leaves his children Mem cares for him because, she loves him very much. He lets his five year old daughter Daphne into the field for plucking cotton and also fears that he cannot “Save his children from slavery”, In *The Third Life of Grange Copeland (48)* he wants his children to be free. He is very well knows about the harshness he had undergone and wants his children to be free.

Black men were not interested in the empowerment of Black women. Brownfield does not even take Mem to a midwife during her pregnancy. He drinks and ignores the birth of his child. When “*Mem awakened Brownfield and asked him to get the midwife” The Third Life of Grange Copeland (97)* he is in a full drunken stage and is not to go out and earn but she refuses to obey him. So, he stays with her. He makes her pregnant twice, making her health slack and making her to leave the job. He accuses “Mem of being unfaithful to him, of being used by white men” *The Third Life of Grange Copeland (78)*. She denies the charge “*tearfully and fourth fully denied*”. He accuses her for the charge over him to upset her and win naturally. This also makes her ill. But she recovers her health and again goes back to work, which gives a blow to him.

Love marriage and fidelity are emphasized by Walker in this novel. For instance, the last child of Brownfield is Ruth. After her birth, he accuses Mem of having slept with White people. He wants Mem to be submissive like his mother to Grange. “*She (Margaret) didn’t have a thing to say that did not in some way show her submission to his father” The Third Life of Grange*

Copeland (6). He is more attracted by her voice, education and beauty. After seeing her, he avoids sexual contacts with Josie and Lorene. He considers his wedding with Mem to be *“The pinnacle of his achievement in extricating himself from evil and the devil aligning him with love”* *The Third Life of Grange Copeland (72)*. Thus marrying beautiful and educating Black women is considered a great achievement for Black men. Blacks loved their children though they were brutally treated by their masters. Brownfield is afraid of his father when he is in a drunken state. When he returns home in such a condition, he even threatens to *“kill wife and his son Brownfield”* *The Third Life of Grange Copeland (15)*. But he is polite and submissive to his master Mr. Shipley. When he asks questions to him he trembles and *replies “Yes sir”* *The Third Life of Grange Copeland (11)* to him. This is there in his mind when he sees his own daughter Daphne working in the fields. He is hurt mentally. This reveals Brownfield’s love for his daughter.

Margaret wants her son Brownfield to go to school. But they are not able to do so as Grange is in debt and so he is made to work in the cotton fields. Brownfield is frightened to see his father Grange. There is a fear in his children when they see their father beating Mem senselessly. They think, he will beat them also. Brownfield does not think about his children and to him they are not really *“human children”* *The Third Life of Grange Copeland (106)*. Mem decides *“to jump on him and kill him dead”* *The Third Life of Grange Copeland (110)* so that the children will be happy. After returning, from North, Grange gives money to Brownfield to develop the financial status of the family but he drinks liquor and wastes the money. Next time, Grange Copeland gives money to Mem. Brownfield shoots down Mem by aiming the *“gun with drunken accuracy right into her face”* *The Third Life of Grange Copeland (172)* as he thinks that she has lost her chastity. Black men’s attempt to save the present and the future generations from

abuse and ill treatment are portrayed in this novel. The second generation is primarily represented by Brownfield, Grange's son and his wife Mem. The Third generation is represented by Ruth and the coming of Grange from North to help his granddaughter's and his family. He is going to North leaving Margaret and his children in debt.

Ruth is also shown as the girl of the future for Blacks. Grange helps her to come out of slavery as he takes her with him to Josie's house and Inn, which comes to Grange after he marries Josie. At the end of the novel, the Civil Right Movement is in its peak people try to realize that they should participate in it. A Black and a White couple come to register their votes. On seeing this, Grange hopes that Black will get equality and be free from brutality, which he had faced in his life. Ruth symbolizes the hope for Grange that Black people will get equality and escape from brutal acts. Ruth in this novel represents a perfect model for Walker and also in for later novels, Winchell describes as "*Ruth, the precursor of later Walker women who have chance to overcome brutality and injustice to survive*" (52). Non-violence brings a happy ending to this novel.

Ruth now sees the Civil Rights Movement under the leadership of Martin Luther King Jr. and is attracted by his non-violent movement. Ruth thinks that the only violence that she has seen in the murder of her mother by her father and realizes the fact that violence can never lead to happiness. Her mother's murder is a heavy loss to the member of his family. Ruth becomes a person for Grange's regeneration and accepts the wrong things done by him in his first life. She makes him realize his mistakes and injustice that he has done to Margaret in the past and provokes him not to do the same in the present and in the future, which will affect her life. He realizes his mistake and "*cried whenever he talked about*" (*Margaret*) that he has wronged her. Ruth is born out of her mother without the help of a midwife as her father is fully drunk and half

unconscious. Walker says that Ruth “*popped out by herself*” *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (97). This shows the negligence of black men.

Reconciliation is shown in this novel. Grange feels that the mistakes he commits in his first, life is the cause for the change of mind of his son Brownfield. In his third life, he considers Ruth as the symbol of hope for the empowerment in black community. He goes off to North in search of a job to repay the debt. He comes from North and wants to spend his life with three grandchildren and lead their life well and save them from brutality, which he and his son had suffered all through his life. White women were not ready to accept the help of blacks even when they are in deep trouble. A white woman rejects Grange’s help as he is a Nigger. He also tells Ruth that racism, in mind of the white lady, makes her lose her life. He also robs the money from her with which he leads a happy life.

Grange observes in his third life that equality has come to them at last when a Black and a White couple register their votes. Black men try to save the future of their children in several ways. Grange returns home as a reformed man help Brownfield family. He marries Josie and gets her property. When Brownfield returns from jail, Grange refuses to hand over Ruth to him. He shoots her to save Ruth is left alone with Josie and she watches the Civil Rights Marches.

Grange in the first life was very arrogant when he comes to the house after working in the fields. He has illegal affairs with Josie. The working condition in the field makes him a brute. He doesn’t apologies to Margaret in his third life as she sleeps with other men in the fields due to her hatred towards him. When grange sees a pregnant white woman in the icy pond, her big belly brings forth “*a mixture of sweet and painful recollections*” *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (208). He suddenly thinks about his wife whom he leaves alone in a pregnant state.

Grange “*thought with fears*” *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (250) about Margaret. She does not have independence in her life which Winchell opines that “*she has not achieved a level of independence from Grange that will enable her to feel she can survive without him*” (47). Due to this, she is not able to move out of her family when Grange tries to sell her for his debts. She thinks that she can give her body to anyone but not for money. This shows the attachment of black women to their family and the absence of independence to them.

The sexual abuse of men by women is well pictured in this novel. Josie, the prostitute, first takes Grange in the juke joint and then she takes Brownfield. Both Josie and her daughter Lorene wants Brownfield to satisfy the lust. After hearing the story of Brownfield about his father and mother, “*Josie had clucked sympathetically as he told of his unfortunate life with Margaret and Grange*” *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (49). Even prostitute is used for empowerment through economic independence. Josie becomes a prostitute at the age of sixteen when she is raped and sexually abused by her father’s friends.

Education leads to the empowerment of Black women. Though Josie is a prostitute, she educates her “*Adopted daughter*” *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (62) Mem. She is also eager to send her daughter Lorene to school but “*she was too stubborn*” *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (63) and refuses to go. This shows how Black women try to educate their children. Education and other sources of power are well portrayed in this novel. Mem is born as an illegitimate family. She is the only educated woman character in this novel. She became a school teacher after completing her studies. She too loves Brownfield as he loves her. An educated Black woman can lead an independent life without her husband.

Poverty and frustration are well pictured in this novel. *Brownfield Chirstian states that children are “The most affected by their parents”* (196) which well be both for that of

Grange and Brownfield. The women in this novel, particularly Mem and Margaret, try to gain it or to rebel against odds in their life against Mem or the society, says, Christian. Though men knew that women, particularly their wives, are not to be blamed for their misdeeds in life but the true cause for their deeds is their poverty and their wives become the accessible tragedy on whom men show their frustration. Black women do not accept the intrusion of another woman in their life. Josie, for instance, wants to drive away Mem, who comes between her and Brownfield. She also wants to drive Ruth and she comes angry with them.

At the novel's conclusion, Grange returns to his family a broken yet compassionate man and attempts to atone for his past transgressions with the help of his granddaughter, Ruth. While some reviewers accused Walker of reviving stereotypes about the dysfunctional Black family, other praised her use of intensive, descriptive language in creating believable characters.

The theme of the novel is the answer or rather the complex of answers to the question. How does one escape? Grange Copeland's three provide the clues. The first answer is to step outside conditions that appear to be universal but in fact are only indigenous to one's own local setting. This can be accomplished through education which frees the mind of environmental determinism. For Grange, education comes first from experience in a different setting then from reading. It provides a second environment that demonstrates the first to be local and limited. The resulting double consciousness reveals the apparently inescapable condition to be syndrome that has a cure.

Walker emphasizes the importance of both consciousness and aggressiveness in that transformation. Past experiences must not remain repressed in the unconscious. They must be faced; the crimes one has committed in the name of despair must be acknowledged and one's public behavior must witness to the new faith. Grange takes all the crucial steps. He names white

society as the enemy, aggressively takes charge of his own life to combat that society, but also accepts responsibility for his own worst acts. He should never have permitted the enemy to take away all his manhood. He redefines himself as a man by never again violating his essential responsibilities, never again acting according to the will of the enemy.

Before the escape is complete, one must establish contact through love with another human being. For Walker, the place to begin is within the family, for Grange, the person in his granddaughter Ruth. The obsessive concern of the male slave mentality was to keep one's fellows even lower than oneself; the enlightened concern of the new black is to open up the world, to give others the freedom to feel, think and act. This Grange's philosophy of life when dies.

Education plays an important role in the empowerment of human race in general. During the days of slavery, Black women could not even dream of receiving any form of education. Men believed that educated women would overtake them in all the fields. So they did not educate them. Only an educated woman can improve the status of family. She can understand herself and the world around her. Mem empowers herself through education. Due to this, she is able to stand independently without her husband's help. Margaret who is an uneducated commits suicide as she depends on her husband. Ignorance of Backs is the root cause for their misery. Equality is an important factor which helps people particularly Blacks to empower themselves. If there is no equality then people will be slaves and submit without protest to the whims and fancies of their masters. Black Women can empower themselves only if they get fundamental rights.

Margaret in *The Third Life* is not able to point out her husband's fault in the absence of fundamental right's even in her own house. Domestic harmony of Blacks will lead to the empowerment of the whole family. Love plays an important role in relationships within her

family. The absence of parental socialization is found in black men who do not care for their children's future. Black women, on the other hand, pay more attention to their children's future. The relationship in Grange's family is not so good. This affects his son Brownfield psychologically. Black women can empower themselves only when they protest against the brutal nature of men. They have to protest against the white Government to get their fundamental rights. Mem in *The Third Life* protests against the brutal nature of Brownfield though she loves him. The submissive nature of Margaret makes Grange to oppose her in every aspect.

Walker in this novel reveals her compassion more for women characters than men to arouse the reader's indignation at the price Black women pay as victims of racial and sexual exploitations. The sexual abuse of men, poverty and frustrations are well pictured in this novel. Walker is one of the most prolific Black women writers in America Alice Walker is highly regarded writer of powerfully expressive fiction. Her work consistently reflects her concern with racial, sexual and political survival. Her central theme is the black women's struggle for spiritual wholeness and for sexual, political and racial equality and for the empowerment of black women. Walker's message of hope and the possibility of change speak to people of both sexes and all races.

Alice Walker's portrayal of black woman inevitably follows her firm opinion on their beauty. She is fascinated by the lives of her ancestors. She wonders how they have managed to live the life as they have done. The old people, both male and female, in her opinion continue to emanate beauty irrespective of their living conditions. Above all, she is very much involved in the survival of the Black women. This study began with an attempt to find out how Black women suffered and subsequently empower themselves in *Alice Walker's* novel "*The Third Life of Grange Copeland*". *Alice Walker* aims at glorifying the black women culture with folk-lore's,

traditions, myths and the past. She ardently disapproves the multiple oppressions inflicted on the poor black woman. She delves deep into the life of black woman and keeps us engrossed “*in a special, very particular universe*” (Toni Morrison, *pix*). The importance of education and equality is realized in all the continents a factors leading to social harmony and universal peace.

Women in general need them for empowerment and hence the relevance is an attempt to find out how black woman suffered and subsequently empowered themselves in the novel “*The Third Grange Copeland*”

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