

# Asian Resonance

## The Legacy of Hate and Violence in Alice Walker's The Third Life of Grange Copeland

### Abstract

Alice Walker's reputation rests largely on her in-depth analysis of the American race-relations, and her poignant interpretation of the terrifying black experiences. Alice Walker is best known for her fiction about the black women who achieve heroic stature within the confines of their ordinary day-to-day lives. The Afro-American women experienced the pangs of violence engendered by racism and sexist violence within the community. Whether the appeal is to the white conscience or the black consciousness, Walker firmly contends that the value most frequently celebrated in the tradition of the Afro-American novel is the spiritual resiliency of the people to survive, individually and collectively with dignity and to realize fully their human potential. This paper is primarily based on the selected novel of prolific Pulitzer Prize winner, Afro-American writer, Alice Walker who has explored the dynamics of discord and violence plaguing the African-American communities in her works. This paper attempts to discuss Walker's message to overcome the strife in life, the resolutions of which she projects in her novels are: to be able to love and forgive unconditionally, embracing a mindset of universality; to transcend boundaries of race and sex by resisting rigid definitions of society and she substitutes the concept of revolution with the ideal of transformation. Walker has made a significant contribution to the African points of view and perspectives on life, politics, culture and history and her novels have earned her a well deserved reputation that marks her out as a writer of the protest literature. Her vision encompasses mankind as a whole and is global in its scope.

**Keywords:** Discord, Violence, Exploitation, American Race-Relations, Black Experiences, Spiritual Resiliency, Transformation, Unification, Defence Mechanisms.

### Introduction

#### Objective of this Paper

To expose to the world, the terrifying black experiences of Afro-Americans, especially, black women, and the violence and exploitation engendered by racism and sexism.

This discussion is based on the selected novel of Alice Walker's 'The Third World of Grange Copeland'. Through highlighting the seminal themes of the novel, this paper attempts to throw light on Alice Walker's message to overcome strife in life and the resolutions she adopts to sustain body, mind and soul intact, and her effort to uphold the legacy and culture of Africa.

#### Legacy of Hate and Violence In Alice Walker's 'The Third Life of Grange Copeland'

The contemporary African American woman writer, Walker remarked in an interview:

We are a people. A people do not throw their geniuses away. And if they are thrown away, it is our duty as artists and as witnesses for the future to collect them again for the sake children, and, if necessary, bone by bone.<sup>1</sup>

Alice Walker's reputation rests largely on her in-depth analysis of the American race-relations, and her poignant interpretation of the terrifying black experiences. Throughout her literary career, Alice Walker plays two

roles: one of a fiery prophet of the racial apocalypse', and another of a sensitive explorer of the black woman's inner most nature. Through these roles, she effectively highlights the causes of discord and violence in the Afro-American community. In a later publication, Walker discusses

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the impact of patriarchal violence within her own family. Her brother had shot her in the eye with an air rifle, when she was seven years old and damaged her pupil. While her parents referred to the event as 'Alice's accident', Walker considers her blinding as a "patriarchal wound".

The first novel written by Walker, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, graphically exposes the dimensions of discord and violence operating at several stages at the individual and the community levels. The strife experienced at these levels is internal and external in character. Walker also highlights the defence mechanisms adopted by the Afro-Americans to survive the assault of oppression and suggests discord resolutions for the raging conflicts at hand.

This novel projects many of her prevalent themes, vis-a- vis, race-relations, alienation, search for identity, psychic and physical oppression of women through marriage, motherhood and rape, and particularly, the domination of the 'powerless women by the equally powerless men'. Black literature in America is distinguished for its mirroring of black social reality and Walker has presented some memorable reminiscences of black life. Walker uses the four major seminal themes in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, to highlight the causes and the permeation of discord in the lives of the Afro-Americans. First, she deals with the colour contrast between the blacks and the whites. Secondly, she maintains that slavery, a blot on American history and culture, had reduced the blacks to an existence of non-humans. Thirdly, she exposes the white man's narrow-minded prejudices against the blacks. Lastly, she presents the evils among the blacks themselves that cause untold miseries in black lives, especially black women.

Walker narrates in detail the defence mechanisms which the blacks adopted to transform themselves from object to subject and from silence into speech. They had to assume a contrived identity, a false image to avert the aggression they had faced against the white oppressors. The black women had to wear masks in order to escape the brutality of their own males as well as the lust of the white masters. The blacks adopted a deliberate insensitivity or turned 'invisible' in response to the white violence and subjugation. They resorted to trickery, one of the survival techniques of their ancestors and used their new identity as trickster to salvage and retain whatever dignity they possessed.

The novel, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* covers a period of American history from 1920s to the peak of the Civil Rights Movement in the early 1960s. It focuses on the black family, the Copelands and tells the history of three generations - Grange, his son Brownfield and his grandchild Ruth - and in the process, records the speech, "imagination" and "fantasies" constituting their collective consciousness.

The novel is devoted to the narratives of inter-racial antagonisms, abuses of Afro-American internal familial conflicts, self-hatred and is designed primarily from the point of view of the Southern black men. Walker brings to light the protagonist's perception of his past as crucial to his personal transformation in the present and possibility of change in the future. In the first part of the novel, she graphically lays out the dreary

pattern of life for Grange, the father, whose life is dominated by his response to an oppressive and dehumanizing socio-economic structure of share cropping which deprives him of his personhood. With no emancipation in view, and possessed with self-hatred, he inflicts excruciating violence on his wife, Margaret and denies parental love and care to his son Brownfield.

The novel sets up the social pattern in which the powerlessness of the black men in the face of the white hostility, leads them to victimize the black women, especially their wives, and is naturalistic in its depiction of the repetition of racial hatred and personal oppression. Thus a legacy of violence and revulsion is handed over to his son who repeats the same pattern of despair resulting in the murder of his wife Mem and his complete degeneration. Both father and son seek solace at the destination of Josie, a prostitute.

In *The Third Life*, both male and female characters are caught beneath the brutally oppressive social machinery. Calvin Hernton remarks about the indispensability of the sexuality of the American racism:

The sexualization of racism in the United States is a unique phenomenon in the history of mankind; it is anomaly of the first order. In fact, there is sexual involvement, at once real and vicarious, connecting white and black people in America that spans the history of the country from the era of slavery to the present, an involvement so immaculate and yet so perverse, so ethereal and yet so concrete that all race relations tend to be, however subtle, sex relations.<sup>2</sup>

Walker in an interview with John O'Brien, explains that the novel is "ostensibly about a man and his son, but it is the women and how they are treated that colours everything."<sup>3</sup> Being subjected to an endless cycle of physical, emotional and spiritual poverty, Grange, strips Margaret of her humanity, rendering her indistinguishable from "their dog". Not even in the murder of her unwanted child and her own suicide does Margaret show defiance, but converts her life as a repository of the black man's rage. In the second cycle of sadomasochistic violence, Brownfield displaces his powerlessness onto women whom he treats with unrelieved venom. Having sexually used and abused Josie, his father's mistress, and her daughter Lorene, he reaches out for the sophisticated Mem and marries her. With delight he beats her until she is haggard and ugly, 'totally without view, without a sky' and tells her that nobody will hire her because she is 'a snaggle toothed old plow mule' and subjects her to several years of 'Saturday-night beatings'. Mem chooses to put herself in the service of an illiterate degenerate who strips her of her 'damn proper language' and her efforts to enhance their standard of living are thwarted by him. She is brought back to "lowness" by the 'weakness of her womb' as he interprets her likeness to movement and freedom as an outcome of his own depleted life and finally murders her.

The powerlessness Walker's women feel is often reaffirmed by the physical abuse they endure in their marriages, through rape and motherhood, an entrapment of their own sexuality. As a result, black women find themselves "suspended" economically and psychologically, carrying the burden of a twofold repression as black persons and as women but

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'womanism', a universalist stance, has brought Alice Walker and her characters safely to the 'land of psychic freedom after a perilous journey fraught with fear, self-hate, and guilt'.

Grange and Brownfield shed their human characteristics in the presence of the white men, making their daily life a masking ritual, steeped in silence. The mechanical quality of their movements and attitudes is the answer to the total subjugation by a cynical, hypocritical white-dominated world. Brownfield observes:

When the truck came, his father's face froze into an unnaturally bland mask ... more impenetrable than his silence. One who could by his presence alone turn his father into a stone or a robot, an object or a cipher or a piece of dirt, except for the sharp bitter odour of sweat, fear and something indefinite... whose source was forcibly contained in flesh.<sup>4</sup>

This odour is the blackness of a black which is their only physical difference from a white and is responsible for the emotional and spiritual vacuum that had blighted their lives. Colour as a determining factor in the black life is also seen at work when Grange and Margaret name their new born son, Brownfield as the first thing they see, is 'brownish colour fields'. Becoming a victim of racism himself, Brownfield reproaches and belittles his educated wife with this colour contrast in mind:

He liked to sling the perfection of white women at her because colour was something she could not change and as his own coloured skin annoyed him he meant hers to humble her". ...You ain't white, but even as he said this, he hated with his whole heart the women he wanted and did not want his wife to imitate.<sup>5</sup>

The Copeland family has no option but to give vent to the discord faced in their early lives by remaining silent. Brownfield grows conscious of the "long periods of uninterrupted quiet". His father almost never speaks to him, while his mother "doesn't have a thing to say that does not in some way show her submission to his father."<sup>6</sup> Silence characterizes their feelings of oppression; punctuated sometimes by their inarticulate mumblings which also signifies their acceptance of hopelessness. Trudier Harris opines:

Grange Copeland and his son Brownfield fit into this category of those who have been psychologically, socially and politically emasculated because of the sharecropping system they initially live and work. It is a system that drains the life energy from men who must see reflected in the eyes of those for whom they work the evaluation that they are less than human.<sup>7</sup>

This 'mark of oppression' is seen in Brownfield, a case of 'blighted growth due to the blight of slavery that he is born into'. Described as, "undernourished and diseased, his head covered with tatter sores, his legs afflicted with tomato sores, and his armpits filled with boils running with pus",<sup>8</sup> the same pathological environment of slavery that had claimed Grange, now repeats itself with Brownfield:

That was the year he first saw how his own life was becoming a repetition of his father's. He could not save his children from slavery; they did not even belong to him....He was working on the same farm and in debt up to his hat-brim.<sup>9</sup>

Walker maintains that the narrow-minded white prejudice overshadows much of American life and letters. In his second life up North, he tries to save the life of a drowning pregnant white woman who rejects his goodwill by categorizing him as a "thing" and calling him a "nigger" and with a tone of disgust, she embraces her watery grave. The feelings of futility and the conflict at being trapped within the sharecropping web does not prompt Grange to question the legitimacy of the system. Instead, he concludes that to regain his manhood and self-respect, he must kill their oppressors. Relegated to a position of complete invisibility in the North, he becomes an epitome of black violence and unleashes his hatred against the whites:

He fought more and more with whites. And in this fighting too, he tasted the sweet surge of blood rightfully directed in its wrath that proclaimed his freedom, his manhood.<sup>10</sup>

Walker does not present industrial labour as a probable solution to the poverty faced by Grange, but this journey as a 'quest for psychic wholeness', leads to a radical conversion which prepares Grange for his third life. W. Lawrence Hogue states:

The American soil structure turns the Black man into a beast suppressing his human qualities and accenting his animal tendencies. The black man, in turn, reflects his violent relation with his white landowner in his relations with his wife and son. He takes his anger and frustration out not on the social system or the people who exercise its power but on his children and so the black woman, who, as he does in the master-slave, remains loyal and submissive.<sup>11</sup>

Walker's views on racism become more fervent and even prophetic as she concurs with James Baldwin, who opines, "The salvation of America lies in whether or not it is able to embrace the Black face. If it cannot do that, I do not think the country has a future."<sup>12</sup>

In the third part of his life, Grange, by assuming responsibility for his thoughts and actions, is able to love himself and his grandchild Ruth and changes the 'motifs in the pattern that had made up the quilt of his life with the possibility of surviving whole'. This revelation resides not in his repulsion of the whites, but in his love for his granddaughter Ruth, his reverence for the land, his Afro-American Southern heritage and thus locates his needs for his racial identity- a sense of place and a feeling of family and community. Walker agrees that while the system of sharecropping is essentially dehumanizing, one has the possibility to transcend that dehumanization, just as Grange is able to transform his existence, by moving towards the North where he experiences an enlightenment of learning to love and to assume responsibility for his actions. Brownfield, in his extreme passivity, self-destructs refusing to renew or change himself, and wallows in poverty, illness, hopelessness and succumbs to his violent fate.

Walker's fiction is deeply preoccupied with the search for human liberation through motion and open journeying. Representative slave narratives usually conclude with the hero pointed "north" as they look for stability and secure identity. Walker disagrees with Phyllis Klotman, who claimed that 'any movement in black fiction is meaningless since the blacks have been denied a 'place' in American life and face the pangs of

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discord without riddance'. She refutes Byden Jackson's opinion that "black fiction is either static or concerned with various types of failed motion when he says, "the world of negro fiction is as static as the medieval synthesis... To an overwhelming degree, the universe of Negro fiction is panoramic, not dramatic."<sup>13</sup>

The Third Life offers a complex view of the journey. Central to the novel is a powerful thematic discord between the characters' strong desire for a stable life centering on 'a home' and their equally strong inclination towards a radical change, a 'new life' that could be possible by settling down in a different place. This is evident in Brownfield, who dreams of a mansion and a car, but has to confront the cold white world which freezes his life. Grange's sojourn in New York is considered "whole and psychic" which prepares him in his third life for a rich and spiritually compelling world, a sanctuary, a refuge without fear and hatred which had permeated his earlier two lives. In an attempt to redeem Ruth, his grandchild, from the evils of slavery, Grange tells her the story of Exodus from the Holy Bible to strengthen her imagination for flight. He hopes that Ruth will be a representative of the future who believes in the viability of change.

Ruth exhibits the streak of hope to survive a 'whole' without being a martyr like Margaret and Mem. She eagerly reads the books that Grange steals from the library, telling her that 'the world wasn't as big then, as it is now' and he encourages her to leave Baker County to fulfill the deepest yearnings of her evolving self. A crucial phase of Ruth's development is her

growing awareness of society as a dynamic process instead of a 'static hierarchy' and by the end of the novel, Ruth feels, she will transform her world.

## Conclusion

Through this novel, Alice Walker raises contemporary issues like racism, slavery, identity crisis, alienation, materialism, the power of spirituality, unconditional love and forgiveness. Analyses of the novel, exhibits the defence mechanisms, and the methods adopted to survive are clearly delineated.

This paper concludes on the note of promoting such literature that can salvage the fragmented existence of the marginalized and reinforce that such humans are not perpetually estranged from the realms of higher consciousness.

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