

Exploring the Abandonment and Oppression of Women in the Selected Novels of Alice Walker and Toni Morrison

Abstract

Song of Solomon, a novel by Toni Morrison, the first African American woman writer who won the Noble Prize for literature, in 1931. *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* by Alice Walker, a black feminist icon, frame the black culture through oppression and won the Pulitzer Prize for her best novel, *The Color Purple*. To expose the unique culture of America, the broad area of this paper analyzes the men's repeated abandonment of women in Song of Solomon shows that the novel's female characters suffer a double oppression by racism, but they must also pay the price for men's freedom. The study connects the abandonment with oppression. Toni Morrison and Alice Walker use many characters to engage painful and dreadful history of abandonment and oppression. By exploring the abandonment and oppression of women this paper analyse writer's own cultural background, the image of women, and the representation of female characters who suffers. The study concludes, with many illustrations on the abandonment and oppression of women with the arguments of critics. Alice Walker coined the term "womanist" to mean "A black feminist of Color" in 1983. It is also a deal with the study of women include women characters who want to establish an independent and free self.

Keywords: Abandonment, Oppression, Alienation, Culture and Race.

Introduction

Abandonment isn't just a physical circumstance, it can be mental or emotional state, which is something that people, should keep in mind when interacting with others. On the other hand oppression is defined as torture or degrading treatment and the use of threat or violence. It is the exercise of power/authority in a burden, cruel or unjust manner. Oppression is also defined as an act or instance of oppressing the state of being oppressed and the feeling of being heavily burdened; mentally or physically by troubles adverse conditions and anxiety.

The abandonment and betrayal of women has been seen throughout history and novels including *Song of Solomon* by Toni Morrison. Morrison also expose that how women are too reliant on their men for support, The theme abandonment of women is shown through the relationship of Toni Morrison uses her characters to portray not only a theme but personal motive. Macon II and Ruth, consequently Ruth's emotional, mental, physical and to show this.

Song of Solomon, is a novel by American author Toni Morrison, this novel won the National Books Critics Award, was chosen for Oprah Winfrey's popular book club, and was cited by the Swedish Academy in awarding Morrison the 1993 Noble Prize in Literature. The novel called bildungsroman, or coming-of-age novel traces the birth, youth, and maturation of the protagonist, Milkman Dead. Born in Michigan in 1931 by miraculous means, Milkman is a gifted child until he learns at the age of four that humans cannot fly. Changed by this revelation, he grows up a spoiled, self-centered child. Torn between the magical, spiritual world of his father's sister, Pilate, and that of his greedy property-owning father Macon Dead. Milkman follows in the footsteps of his father and becomes Macon's assistant. Burdened by his parents' unspeakable confidences and troubled by his loveless household, he seeks solace at his Aunt Pilate's and by spending time with his best friend, Guitar Bains.



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Living a spoiled, infantile existence until the age of 31, Milkman's sole reason for being is to seek pleasure. After a 14-year relationship with Pilate's granddaughter, Hager, loses its lustre, Milkman decides to end it. Hager has become too accessible, and their love-making, which so sanitized. Milkman when he was younger has lost its appeal. Distraught by Milkman's mistreatment of her, Hager repeatedly tries to kill him.

Alice Walker's *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, emphasizes a danger to the black female as well in adopting definition of self. It is a critical analysis on the black people oppression, gender discrimination, suppression, and enslavement, behaviour of character and self-realization. Grange and his son Brownfield get oppressed by the white society, who is the victims of sharecropping system; to take out their frustration they brutalize their women. The black women are oppressed and suppressed in different aspects. The black women, in the novel *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* is dominated and abused by men of their own community, they were explored as collective voicelessness of African American women.

The Third Life of Grange Copeland, Walker's first novel, is the chronological story of three generations of a black sharecropping family in the South. The novel addresses several issues that occupy Walker's career; the abuse of black women by their husbands and fathers, the Civil Right Movement, and the necessities of self-reliance and moral responsibility. Walker says, "It is an incredibly difficult novel to write, for I had to look at, and name, and speak up about violence among black people in the black community at the same time that black people (and some whites)...including me and my family were enduring massive psychological and physical violence from white supremacist in the southern states, particularly Mississippi" (4).

The novel is in the account of three generation of the Copeland family, begins in rural Georgia in the 1920's and ends during the early stages of the Civil Rights Movements in the early 1960's. The novel records the impact of racism and poverty on the family by emphasizing what it does to individuals and by showing what individuals must do to keep alive kinship, the strongest weapon black people have to fight injustice.

Objective of the Study

In this research paper, I propose to study on the abandonment and oppression of women and focuses on the forces of men that impinge on the life of black women. The main objectives are to identify the causes and effects of abandonment and its difference from the oppression. In cultural studies we find that men bear responsibility only for themselves, but women are responsible for themselves, their families, and their communities. To evaluate the relationship between causes of abandoned women with respect to the various men my main aim is to formulate a conceptual framework for mitigating the problems leading to the abandonment of women.

By examining the concept of oppression within the novel my aim to analyze what Walker is

saying about the oppression of Black women because of patriarchal structures and warped views of masculinity within the novel. I argue that just as Walker is paying her rent to humanity by using her writing as a form of activism, she is also illustrating how Grange and Brownfield are paying the price to be seen as men in their society and What motivates the blacks to write is the condition of oppression, and what they desire of their writing is to ameliorate their condition.

Review of Literature

Sean M. Kirby in his book, *Naming and Identity in Toni Morrison's Beloved and Song of Solomon 2014* advocates that abandonment of women, slavery, prejudices and gender discrimination placed upon countless African Americans with incredible detail. It is a truth all African Americans know, one that was born out of slavery, one date that still burns people today the truth that "anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind" (Morrison, 1987). *Second Hand: Song of Solomon, Toni Morrison (Jan.24, 2017)* Chris Townsend in his review *Second Hand: Song of Solomon, Toni Morrison (Jan.24, 2017)* analyses the struggle of African American women come to terms with their identities precisely as American citizens. Morrison, the Noble committee decided, "gives life to an essential aspect of American reality" in her novels. Bob, Corbet in his review on *Song of Solomon by Toni Morrison (2015)* discusses on the theme of abandonment with women's emotional, physical and mental statement. Robert, Mccrum in his book *The 100 Best Novels: Book no. 89 Song of Solomon by Toni Morrison (2015)* emphasizes on the women's role as a housewife later he turned this discussion with the breakup of marriage and divorce system.

Harold Hellenbrand in his review *Speech after Silence: Alice Walker's the Third Life of Grange Copeland* explores the themes of violence, degradation and oppression with both tenderness and tenacity. Cochran, Kate. *When the Lessons Hurt: the Third Life of Grange Copeland as Joban Allegory* recounts three different experiences of racial and economic oppression in the South. Walker presents three variations on the job quest in the journeys of Brownfield, Grange and Ruth; these characters begin their stories as uniquely oppressed in the sharecropping system and corresponding environment of domestic violence. Hixon Webb Mamie in his review *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* advocates the life of Grange and Brownfield, and discusses that Walker does not excuse the black women in the scrutiny. She is concerned about "Grange of the Black Man" "Mem, Margaret and Ruth are the oppressed women" with societal definitions of womanhood, adjust poverty, societal conditions that sometimes lead to violence, male-female relationships, and domestic violence among black women.

Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon Ruth's Abandonment (Ruth and Macon's Marriage)

By analyzing the marriage of Ruth and Macon Dead II, Morrison uses their (Ruth and

Macon's) relationship to show that women are too reliant on their men. Through Ruth's emotional, mental, and physical state; the theme of abandonment of women is shown. Ruth's emotional state shows the theme of abandonment or women. In the Macon's household there is a table and on this table there is a water large mark which Ruth uses to assurance that she is alive. She knew it was there, would always be there, but she needed to confirm its presence. Like the keeper of lighthouse and prisoner, she regarded it as a mooring checkpoint some stable visible object that assured her that the world was still there; and that this was life, not a dream. That she was alive somewhere inside, which she acknowledge being true only, because a thing she knew intimately was there, outside herself (Morrison, 11).

Emotionally, Ruth has been abandoned by Macon II to the point where she needs, a physical reminder that she is alive. Ruth and Macon II marriage is compared to a lighthouse and its prisoner; the light house is marriage and Ruth is prisoner. . Ruth is emotionally abandoned in the fact that, Macon II wants nothing to do with her and she doesn't give up trying to get him to return the love.

Ruth is very passive to Macon. Her passiveness shows how emotionally she is abandoned by Macon II, because marriage is about compromise not giving completely into the other person. Ruth's mental state shows the theme of abandonment of women; Ruth has been mentally abandoned by her husband. To feel joy in her life, she resorts to very obscene things. Since Ruth has been mentally abandoned she does odd things, to feel a mental peace or even joy. The pleasure she talks about is the pleasure of receiving love and having that love returned.

Ruth has been physically abandoned by her husband; Ruth and Macon Dead II never have gotten a divorce; they remain together for the duration of the novel. Ruth is physically abandoned by her husband, and this is seen in the following quotation, "And almost twenty years during which he had not laid eyes on her naked feet, he only missed the underwear" (16).

Lena and Corinthians

Morrison suggests the abandonment of Lena and Corinthians through the attitude of Macon and Milkman toward Lena and Corinthians. Macon has completely denied his daughters any opportunity to develop their true selves. In this way Macon has abandoned his role as their father. Milkman has also abandoned Lena and Corinthians through his superior attitude. He has been raised with belief that the sons in a family, especially the oldest or only son, should be pampered and treated as special. Milkman has been raised with a sense of male entitlement but is completely unaware of this. He sees himself as being easygoing toward his sisters when in fact he has taken advantage of them. Milkman has abandoned his role of being a caring brother.

Feeling confined and oppressed in her family, Corinthians makes a bold attempt to find her true self. She secretly gets a job as a maid and gets involved in a love affair with a common worker named

Porter. In both situations Corinthians has to swallow her pride and lower her status. However, Corinthians endures this because she knows she is addressing some basic needs of her true self; namely finding self-esteem through earning a living and satisfying her desire for intimacy with a man. Corinthians has begun the process of finding her true identity.

Lena has also suffered from Macon's attempt to make his family better other black families. For example, when Lena and Corinthians were children, Macon showed them off to other African American kids to make them envious but did not allow his daughters to interact with these children. Living in this sterile environment, Lena fails to form her own identity. Lena exposes part of her true self to Milkman when she reveals her bitterness and resentment to him. Throughout her life Lena has felt put upon for having to take care of her baby brother, who treats her and Corinthian like inferiors or, as Lena puts it, pees on them. Through her bitter rage Lena finally is honest. She makes a first stab at carving her own identity by refusing to make any more velvet flowers and not allowing Milkman to take advantage of her.

Hager's Abandonment (Hager's True Love and Milkman's False Love)

Another example of dead spiritually in *Song of Solomon* is Hager, Pilate's granddaughter, who falls in love with Milkman. For Hager, this passion fills a deep emotional vacuum, providing a substitute that her mother and grandmother have never been able to provide. Hager is deprived of the ordinary communal love that she need" to be truly happy, because she can only love herself in the reflected light of Milkman's false love.

In *Song of Solomon*, Hager deals with many similar false assumptions concerning beauty and is psychologically damaged by them Hager is convinced Milkman will love her if she changes her physical appearance, and so she goes on a wild shopping spree. Her plan does not work and Hager dies believing Milkman would love her if she had silky, copper-colored hair. Hager's world is suddenly turned upside down, and her love mutates into an important rage that rules her body and soul. After Milkman leaves in search of fabled gold, Hager focuses her love-turned-hatred upon herself, and soon it leads to her suicide.

Hager's death, indirectly caused by abandonment, has roots in her lack of a positive self-image. After milkman has dumped her she sees him in a bar with another woman. Hager, possessed by her maddening love for Milkman, has taken to prowling at night in hopes of catching him helpless enough to kill him. Hager's reaction to Milkman's abandonment discloses her vulnerable nature, and her need for a male presence in her life. Hager's love for Milkman is overwhelming; as a woman who cannot control her actions, Hager ultimately becomes dominated by Milkman even after he leaves her. Hager's submissiveness into her role reflects the male dominated society of that time.

Hager relies on Milkman for her emotional survival, and in fact, she cannot live without him. Her reliance on a man may be interpreted on two levels.

Firstly, it is a reference to the overall theme of the novel that many women love too deeply and too strongly, and are then left behind with only their sorrows. Secondly, Hager's male-based survival may be a reminder for woman to support themselves financially without a male.

Ryna's Abandonment (Solomon and Ryna's Marriage)

The *Song of Solomon* not only immortalizes Milkman's ancestry, it is also an important statement about African American social circumstances. In the song, Solomon abandons Ryna to fly back to Africa, and leaves her with twenty one children. The theme of abandonment and flight is very prevalent through the entire novel. As Simone de Beauvoir says of women in her *The Second Sex*, the women in *Song of Solomon* "still dream through the dreams of men" (161). Also the moaning from Ryna's Gulch is an ongoing expression of the suffering of the dead, caused by the abandonment of women, to the living.

Although Ryna is elderly and ill, she supports her children financially, intellectually, and emotionally, relying on this skewed idea of gender roles, the society in the novel guides men and women differently. While men who fly away from their communities and families are venerated as heroes, women who do the same are judged to be irresponsible. Although Solomon abandoned his family with his flight to Africa, generation later he is remembered as the brave patriarch of the whole community. At the same time, Ryna, who was left to care for a brood of children, is remembered as a woman who went mad because she was too weak to uphold her end of the bargain. Residents of Shalimar have named a scary, dark gulch after Ryna, while they have given Solomon's name to a scenic mountain peak. The community rewards Solomon's abandonment of his children but punishes Ryna's inability to take care of them alone.

Ryna's suffering is regarded as punitive, almost illogical. Whereas Solomon is regarded as a hero for escaping the evils of slavery. Although it is she who is left behind with twenty-one children, the town emphasizes Solomon's victory over her misery. Morrison accents the women's hardships to show the double standard society places upon women.

Pilate Dead's Abandonment

Pilate can also be seen as the protagonist of the *Song of Solomon* because she is the novel's moral guide. Born without a navel and abandoned from others, Pilate is a survivor of the same racism that has embittered Macon Jr. and Milkman. Pilate is nevertheless loving and selfless; her one regret when dying is that she could not have loved more people. Indeed, as Milkman realizes at the end of his journey, Pilate is the only human being he knows who is able to fly without ever leaving the ground. That is, she is liberated and does not need to escape to attain freedom. Ultimately, Pilate the novel's model character, showing that strength does not have to come at the expense of gentleness and that personal freedom is not necessarily compromised by love for others. , Pilate entrances the boys with a partial story of her life:

"Hadn't been for your daddy, I wouldn't be here today. I would have died in the womb. And died again in the woods. Those woods and the dark would have surely killed me. But he saved me and here I am boiling eggs. Our papa was dead, you see. They blew him five feet up into the air. He was sitting on his fence waiting for 'em and they snuck up from behind and blew him five feet into the air. So when we left Circe's big house we didn't have no place to go, so we just walked around and lived in the woods. . . . And talking about dark! You think dark is just one color, but it ain't. There're five or six kinds of black. Some silky, some woolly. Some just empty. Some like fingers. And it don't stay still. It moves and changes from one kind of black to another" (40).

Although the narrator rarely focuses on what Pilate is feeling or thinking, preferring instead to concentrate on Milkman's quest, Pilate's presence is felt everywhere in the novel.

Alice Walker's *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* Margaret's Oppression

Margaret is a victim of multiple forms of oppression, but her attempt at a powerful upheaval implies that if she had the sufficient means, she would fight and perhaps succeed at claiming her identity and rebuilding her family. Under oppression of these imposing obligations whether modern, or old, Margaret suffers entrapment of her spirit. She is imprisoned within a specific role of subdued wife from bare survival. But this imposition reacts within her inner consciousness which is manifested in terms of encoded and semiotic words to describe her dream. Her one quest for freedom from poverty and insecurity places her in the grip of a more complex imprisonment of patriarchy, rigorous through religious fundamentalism. She cannot comprehend the nature of her new freedom through marriage, she only feels suffocation.

If there is any character worthy of deep character analysis it is Margaret, Grange's first wife, commits suicide after enduring Grange's abuse for years. Before she does so, she becomes bitter and prostitutes herself to the plantation owner, willingly subjecting herself to perpetuated oppression. While one might argue that the character Margaret engages in sex with the plantation owner willingly, her lack of alternative helps the reader to comprehend the Margaret's "choice" is neither an authentic nor a viable option that could lead her to understand herself or others, or which could help her realize her life's purpose and meaning.

When she chooses to kill herself, another action that cannot really be viewed as an act of free will and thought personal choice but simply an escape from unbearable condition. Margaret abandons the fifteen years old Brownfield, who imitates the behaviour of his parents. The story of Margaret represents the myth and reality of the experience of complex construct of black women's historic survival, Margaret, while functioning in the role of wife and mother, rejects and asserts her spiritually in her death, carrying the imposed subjectivity like an 'iron-heavy cross'.

Mem Copeland's Oppression

Mem Copeland is Josie's niece who marries Brownfield. Mem is a quiet girl who attended school in Atlanta. When Brownfield meets her at Josie's inn, he is fascinated by her because she is more refined and educated than he is. She teaches young children at school, and at Brownfield's request she tries to teach him to read and write. They soon marry and move onto a cotton farm. Their aim is to save money to enable them to move to the North, but this never happens. Instead, they find themselves in poverty and debt, and Mem's life goes downhill when Brownfield starts to abuse her. She loses her former good looks, worn down by the hardness of her life and the beatings she suffers from her husband.

The depiction of oppression of Mem is the most detailed and harrowing account in the novel. As opposed to Brownfield, Mem is intelligent, can read and write and has a job as a school teacher. After she marries Brownfield however, all of these attributes are extinguished by him, as he attempts to humiliate her and remind her that she is "...like the rest of us poor niggers..." (56). Mem changes from being relatively at ease with her life to someone who is constantly abused both mentally and physically by her husband. She strives to achieve certain goals out of her already meagre existence, but these attempts are reduced to nothing as Brownfield either wastes the opportunities or rejects her input into matters the family, which he sees as being his sole responsibility and domain. Brownfield makes a successful attempt at sabotaging Mem's dream of a better life. He has no command over his own life or actions and is therefore unwilling to relinquish the control and dominance that he has over his family.

Ruth Copeland's Oppression

Ruth Copeland is the youngest daughter of Brownfield and Mem Copeland. At the age of six, after her mother is murdered, she goes to live with Grange, her grandfather, with whom she forms a tight bond. It is through Ruth that Grange discovers the better side of his own nature. She seems wise beyond her years, and she does not accept her grandfather's negative view of all white people

Walker thus explores a feminist dialectic that feminist is constructed out of the struggle of the living to be free and freedom includes women's struggle out of stereotypes and constrictions of society, the ideologies and myths of sexism, romantic love, marriage and motherhood into free, healthy existence of life.

Josie's Oppression

Josie's character is presented in an oblique and ambivalent way. No doubt, she is part of the ideological context of the narrative in her exposition of the sexual oppression that she has undergone by the male-dominated society. Yet she is neither good, innocent, self-sacrificing and submissive nor totally evil and sexually promiscuous.

Josie's intimate associations with Brownfield and Grange and her need to be loved, suggests that she cannot function without a man in her life. Her oppression by the men life is complete as both Grange and Brownfield use her to justify their own

ends. The former uses her money to set up his own farm, while the latter manipulates Josie to extract his revenge on Grange. As with her father, Josie is rejected and ridiculed by them both and eventually she is left alone.

Conclusion

Throughout the entire novel, women are abandonment by males to fend for themselves. Solomon abandons his wife Ryna, and Milkman leaves behind Hager. The theme of abandonment and flight is very prevalent through the entire novel. Guitar's mother flees after her husband's death, unable to bear the burden of raising her children alone. Pilate leaves behind Reba's father, lest he discover she does not have a navel. Milkman leaves behind Hager, who bestowed upon him unconditional love.

Ruth and Hager, although very different on most accounts, share the problem of loving Milkman. They are both consumed with love for him, and need him for their own secret reasons. For Ruth, Milkman marks her winning fight with Macon over their love life. For Hager, Milkman is the sole emotional support of her existence. Both women think they need Milkman for their survival, and Hager eventually does. As long as the women remain selfish in their want of acquiring Milkman, they will both remain oppressed.

The theme of abandonment was also apparent in African American society; oftentimes, the male had to leave in order to search for work. Many times, as revealed through the Great Migration, families were torn apart as family members went North in search of work. Thus is the case with Milkman's family, as his father's eventually travelled north and left his Southern homeland behind.

Therefore in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* Grange and Brownfield reconsider black women's position as oppressed as a significant cultural history and politics. The object of this representation of the sexist oppression of African women is to interlink black women's oppression with the oppression of other third world women and emphasize that black women's oppression is transcultural. This interconnection between Ruth's suffering and African women's sufferings under patriarchy is evoked through Nettie's letter in *The Color Purple*, "There is a way that the [Olinka] men speak to women that reminds me too much of pa. They listen just long enough to issue instructions...the women also do not "look in a man's face," as they say. To "look in a man's face" is brazen to do" (Walker, 14).

To conclude, we can see the various perspectives of the novel *The Third Life Of Grange Copeland* focuses on the dynamics of oppression, how the characters lost their existence under racism, what are the crucial effects of the racism on characters. The major characters develop their existence with many themes such as choice, free will, violence, and redemption. Black women formed a staunch resistance against oppressive reality of their own existence. There are subtle modes of devaluation of black womanhood by racist culture of American society. The racist opposition of black survival was

emphasized at the cost of sexist oppression of black women by white and the black male alike. Whites' imperialism attempted to form a fake bond of patriarchy between oppressor and the oppressed, the white male and the black male in order to create alienation of black female from male, divisions within black family and community. Black women were equal in oppression and domestic and community life, she also equally resisted and struggled courageously with black men against the institution of slavery.

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