

IMPACT FACTOR 4.67

ISSN 2349-4948

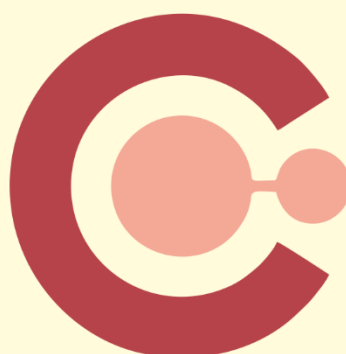
THE CONTEXT

International, Peer Reviewed & Indexed Journal of English Studies

Volume 12 Issue 1, January 2025

Editor

Wamankumar Wani



Published by



Parbhani 431401. MS, India.

www.thecontext.in

ISSN 2349-4948



THE CONTEXT

Quarterly e-journal of English Studies

International, Indexed & Peer Reviewed / Refereed Journal

Publication details and instructions for authors:

www.thecontext.in

IMPACT FACTOR 4.67

This is an Open Access Journal[#]

This is a Peer Reviewed Research Paper. *

***The Third Life of Grange Copeland:* Exploitation of the Powerless by the Powerless**

Dr. A. Y. Ali

M.S.P. Arts, Science & K.P.T. Commerce College Manora Dist: Washim, MS. India.

ABSTRACT

The late sixties were a time of turmoil in the U.S.A. This was the time when Alice Walker was writing her first novel *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, and completed three days before the birth of her daughter Rebecca in 1969. The novel was published in 1970. It is a story of a black sharecropper, named Grange Copeland who is enslaved and dehumanized by poverty and debt. He abandons his wife Margaret and his son Brownfield and migrates to North America. He degrades his wife Mem to the point where he can recover part of his ego by dominating her. He betters and crushes his wife and their three daughters and eventually kills her out of neurotic jealousy. The youngest daughter Ruth, is taken in by Grange. With the passing of time, he returns to South and is totally transformed. He nurtures and protects Ruth in the end to the point of killing his own son and sacrificing his own life. Thus, Grange Copeland evolves from a victim of abuse, by his white boss to a perpetrator of abuse against his own wife and son and, finally, in his 'third life,' into the protector and guardian of his beloved granddaughter, Ruth.

Keywords: *Racism and oppression; Black masculinity; Post slavery identity; Feminist literary criticism; civil rights era*

FULL PAPER

Alice Walker tells the story of a Grange Copeland, a man who lives a life full of degradation and oppression. The novel also presents the predicament of women like Margaret, Mem, and Josie, their sufferings, hardships and pains. The novel portrays the black as victims of oppression, exploitation, racism and sexism. All the women are Copeland women in one generation or the other who are facing problems, inhuman treatment, and fighting against all odds in their lives. It is through their oppression and sufferings that they understand their situations and struggle to assert their identity and to achieve dignity in the black world. Alice Walker tries to tell how Margaret, Mem and Josie are ill-treated by the black men and especially by their own husbands who abuse them as a whores and prostitutes. They become the victims of their own people.

Grange Copeland begins his married life with Margaret as an optimistic sharecropper. By the time his son Brownfield is born, the white landlords' exploitation of Grange's labour resulting in irreversible indebtedness, spawns' hopeless frustration. Grange's feelings of inadequacy precipitate rage that finds misdirect expression in the abuse of his wife and son.

He drinks heavily and begins a sexual relationship with a prostitute named Josie. His wife Margaret cannot tolerate his illicit relationship with prostitute and hence retaliates by having sex with white men, which results in a light skinned baby. Grange abandons his wife and children and migrates to North America. Completely demoralized, Margaret kills the baby and herself, leaving Brownfield alone. Brownfield determines not to work for the same white man who controls his father, but even as he tries to break from Grange's behaviour pattern, he unknowingly becomes involved with Josie, his father's mistress.

Brownfield, falling into the same trap of oppression and domination that Grange did, sets into a more violent method and mistreats his wife, Mem, shoots her with his gun just to take revenge upon her. Grange marries woman, Josie who is driven out of her home by her father because she is pregnant though she is not married. Grange buys an isolated farm, self-sufficient, and free of whites, free in his hatred and isolation. In the following years, Brownfield kills his wife, and Grange takes custody of Ruth, one of Brownfield's daughters. Thus, almost all women characters are oppressed, victimized by their black men.

Half a century of a family history is the narrative material used in the novel to dramatize essential changes in the conditions of black people in the rural south of United States, beginning in total economic and psychological dependence and moving towards a certain measure of self-awareness as the ground for a new self-concept and the social roles of life-plans based on them. At the same time, the novel brings out the truth about the dire condition of a black women's lives and Grange Copeland becomes a story teller of this condition. It is through three different generations; the plight of black women is brought out and presented as to reveal the fact that the change may

come in men's life but the plight of black women remains as it is in all generations. Behra P. B and Rathod M write in this context:

Since long time Indian farmers have been facing a number of socio-economic problems such as harassment by moneylenders, inability to repay debts following crop loss, inability to get medical treatment for the family etc. The problem is compounded lack of positive and cooperative support from banks specially in the face of inclement weather and market fluctuations. Agriculture is the main stay of the state of Maharashtra. Total irrigated area which has been used for cultivation is 33,500 sq. kilometres. Two of the reasons for such a pathetic state of farmers are pressure of moneylenders and employment problems of the farmers' children. Farmers are hence prompted to turn to local moneylenders (Sahukars) who charge then a much higher rate of interest. When the harvest come the production is not to their expectations. Farmers fail to pay the debts or loan taken either from moneylenders or from banks. They commit suicide as a result. Majority of suicide cases are from cotton growing area like Yavatmal district in Vidarbha. These cases of suicides should be stop. There should be a committee not only of agriculturists, economists but also psychiatrists and social workers. Forming self-help group in every 4-5 villages will help. This needs immediate and serious intervention. (Report on farmers Suicide in Wardha 2006).

Grange in the first of his life commits atrocities and cruelties on his wife Margaret. He becomes the victim of oppressive, dehumanizing social order of sharecropping. As a result of which his selfhood is lost. He loses his place in such a world. So, he begins to hate himself and becomes violent. He blames his wife Margaret for his failure and starts drinking, abusing and beating her violently. He does not love his son Brownfield. He hates his oppressor, his wife, and his son.

After the central park incident, he spends weeks fighting with any Whites he sees. He now blames them for the evils he did to his family, 'every white face he cracked, in his sweet wife's name.' (TLG-218) He is different man from the poor sharecropper. He screams 'teach them to hate!' He believes that hatred is the only way to avoid subjugation, the only way to survive. With his new found philosophy, he returns home to Georgia.

Grange, after he returns to the South in his third life, takes custody of Ruth. True freedom for Ruth comes through the efforts of Grange. He decides to protect his granddaughter. He prepares himself for the upbringing and protection of Ruth, but her father, Brownfield takes him to the court. The judge, being a white, gives Ruth's custody to Brownfield. Grange becomes furious on the decision of the court and kills Brownfield. This is followed by the death of Grange in police station. Ruth remains in South to join the Civil Rights Movement.

Margaret is also a victim of poverty and powerlessness. Grange Copeland is victim of the socio-economic structure of sharecropping, the world created by the White men. He blames his wife for such circumstances and inflicts cruelties upon her.

He subsides his anger by beating her constantly. So, Margaret makes up her mind to leave her family for Philadelphia with Silas and Marilyn – Brownfield's uncles and aunt. Martin Sandra States:

Domestic violence in India is a very common issue. Domestic violence means a violence suffered by a woman by male members of her family or relatives. On 19 Mar 2013, the Indian Parliament passed a new law with the goal of more effectively protecting women from sexual violence in India. Still, it is seen that incidents of physical injury most frequently take place. Some newly married brides suffer domestic violence in the form of harassment, physical abuse or death- when she is thought to have not brought enough dowry with marriage. Some cases end up in suicides by hanging, self-poisoning or by fire. (AJP 150)

Brownfield feels that he is a burden to his father and his mother. Margaret follows his father and him like a dog. She is submissive to his father. She has to work without grudging. In addition to these she lacks in communication with her husband, if he speaks to her, he does it in an insulting manner. He constantly humiliates, despises her. She thinks that her husband is not a good person. So, she decides to leave him. He has been in debt because he borrows so heavily that he cannot pay it. In order to pay his debt, he asks his wife to lead a life of prostitute. Even he thinks of selling Margaret to his landlord Mr. Shipley. Later on, he tries to do so. Though Margaret tries to maintain her family by working hard and carries out all kinds of household responsibilities, her husband does not co-operate with her and leaves her behind to die. Margaret is also a victim of husband's jealousy. As his financial conditions are poor, he has no hopes in his life, nobody comes to help him. He is helpless and hopeless; Grange takes to drinking and becomes violent. It results in beating her, blaming and charging her of going with white man. He gets excited and irritates even on trivial matters. Grange develops illicit relationship with Josie. Margaret knows this truth that he has been enjoying sex with one lady from the day of their marriage. He himself is a faithless and infidel husband. Thus, Alice Walker explores the relationship between men and women and brings out the predicament of women through it. In one of her interviews with John O'Brien she herself has explained her purpose of writing:

I wanted to explore the relationship between men and women and why women are always condemned for doing what men do as an expression of their masculinity. Why are women so easily 'tramps' and 'traitors' when men are heroes for engaging in the same activity? Why do women stand for this?' (NL 197)

Women are condemned for their sexual freedom, on the contrary men are heroes for enjoying the same with other women. Walker has raised this discriminatory issue of sexism and intra-racism in her novels of which the black women are victims.

The Third Life of Grange Copeland gives a realistic glimpse into life as a black man in the early to mid-twentieth century, chronicling the inevitable personal and

societal changes that come with maturity, wisdom and time. Despite the fictional nature of the story, the novel challenges readers to face life as it was during that time and the impact that slavery and racism had on real lives. Grange and his family may be figments of Walker's imagination, but she brings them to life in the most masterful way.

Margaret revolts which indicates that she undergoes a change in her attitude. She follows her husband, but now she tries to live her life according to her own way and will. She is transformed, a kind of woman, submissive wife, loving woman changes into a wild woman, free to enjoy sex. She does try to raise herself, but when she is actually abandoned by her husband, she takes poison and poisons her children except Brownfield. She struggles and makes an attempt to gain freedom but she fails. It suggests that the black woman as a wife cannot continue her life without husband though he is a brute. If she does, she has to die.

The novel also deals with the story of another couple --Brownfield and his wife Mem. Mem is an illegitimate daughter of a preacher and Madelaine who is Josie's sister. Alice Walker has woven another story within the story to highlight emphatically the predicament of a black woman. Mem is not as submissive as Margaret. She is a teacher, an ambitious woman and self-conscious. She marries Brownfield. Both differ from each other in their attitude and profession. She teaches Brownfield how to read and write his name. Such an educated, literate woman also becomes victim of her husband.

Brownfield is no longer interested in the life of a sharecropper. So, he runs away from the estate of his landlord Shipley and goes to Josie. There he meets Mem. He is attracted to her and mystified and intrigued by her. They come together and walk together to school. She teaches him and he learns how to write and read his name. As a result, he feels deep love for her. This romantic love results in their marriage. They enjoy their married life but it does not last for long time. They allow changes into tragedy. Brownfield, like his father becomes the victim of circumstances. Being frustrated, he blames his wife Mem for his defect in the world the story repeats itself. He makes serious charges against Mem, beats her accuses her, doubts her chastity and abuses her. But all the charges are denied by Mem as there is no truth. As a result, he turns to drinking and like his father develops illicit relationship with the other woman, Josie. Mem is not an infidel, or faithless woman but he mistreats her. He takes joy in abusing and torturing her. This is how Mem is overtaken by the same fate. Alice Walker wants to correct the wrong, wants to educate her people and wants to transcend them to an awakening through her art. Her art serves as a means of communicating or message that her women are victimized for no fault of them.

Josie, the third female character is also portrayed as a victim. Margaret and Mem are victims of their husband; Josie is a victim of her father. The black women, literate or illiterate, submissive or rebellious, faithful or faithless, wedded or unwedded- all have to live life of pains, and sufferings and are victimized both by their own black people and by the whites. Josie is unwedded but becomes the mother of a child called Lorene; she becomes pregnant when she is 16 years old. Her father belongs

to church, a religious man, a Minister but hates her and humiliates her. She asks for forgiveness but she is not forgiven. She tries her best to win his love, compassion and affection by giving a party on her father's birthday, but it's of no use. She does not allow male guest to attend the party. She drinks a lot, so falls and begins to be in labour. Consequently, she is driven out of her own house by her father.

Because of her father's treatment, she adopts business of selling drinks and involves herself in flesh trade. In this business, her daughter is always found working along with her. Sometimes it happens that the mother and daughter offer themselves to the same customers and share the same lovers at times. Hence Josie does not feel motherly affection for her daughter. She never looks after her. She holds Lorene responsible for the loss of her father's love. As Lorene lacks maternal love, she turns to debauchery; she follows her mother's way and becomes pregnant though unmarried, at the age of sixteen. Both the mother and the daughter sail in the same boat.

Her business brings Mr. Grange Copeland and his son Brownfield into her contact as both of them take to drinking and whoring. She is not sexually loyal to Grange but is emotionally committed to him. Both father and son share the bed with her. She helps Mr. Grange to buy his field. She gives him money by selling only property, 'the Drew Drop Inn.' She gives up her profession and sells her property with a hope to marry Mr. Grange Copeland. But her dream remains a dream. Her desires, hope change into frustration and she becomes poor, again a victim of poverty. Everything is lost in her life.

Alice Walker portrays these three women-characters as a victim of black men, violence, sexism from poverty and powerlessness. They are mere playthings Alice Walker has her own reason of an independent woman. Ruth, Mr. Grange Copeland's granddaughter symbolizes a new woman hoping for new opportunities, new life free from the afflictions in future, along with the changed man, a protector and a guardian of his beloved daughter.

Thus, the novel throws light on the predicament of black women from different angles, in their day-to-day life. They are led from oppression and suppression to self-knowledge, and emancipation. Walker says in an interview with Claudia Tate:

The ideas for the novels come from wanting to understand something. With Grange I wanted to understand what happened in family life over a period of years. And I wanted to understand the concept of self-hatred and family hatred. The kind of destructive thing that Brownfield exemplified. I wanted to understand Brownfield and also to understand people who could be Brownfield but were not. I wanted to know what made the difference. Everything starts from wanting to understand something, whether it's a person or just an event. For instance, the scenes in Grange when Brownfield notices that whenever a White man comes around, Grange's behaviour changes completely - those scenes come from living in a culture that produces that kind of reaction. I have seen people change their behaviour because there are white people around them. My father's behaviour changed. He just lived

in a culture that was intent on destroying him, so he built up defences of various sorts. (BWV 176)

Works cited

- Behra P.B, Rathod M, *Report on Farmer Suicide in Wardha*: Report submitted to collectorate 2006.
- Brien, John O, *Interview with Black writers*, (New York Liveright, 1973). P. 197
Claudia Tate, *Black women writers at work* A Harvest Book Hartcourt P. 176.
- Deshpande S.H. *Hitwada, Farmers of Vidarbha at Crossroads*, Guest column, Thursday, June 7, 2007.
- Martin Sandra, *Domestic violence in Northern India*, American Journal of Epidemiology P. 150.
- Walker, Alice. *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, Hardcourt Brace, Jovanovich Inc., 1970), P. 218. P.128 P. 73 P. 97 P. 221

Copyright permissions and liabilities are the sole responsibility of the author(s). The Context Journal and all Editorial members are NOT responsible for any copyright infringement.

This journal subscribes to the principles of, the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE)
www.publicationethics.org"