

# The Oppression Of The Oppressed In The Blacks Community In Alice Walker's "The Third Life Of Grange Copeland"

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## Abstract

Alice Walker, born February 9, 1944 in Eatonton Georgia, is a black American writer whose novels, short stories, and poems are noted for dealing with the African American culture. She grew up poor, working with her mother as a maid to help in supporting a big family of 8 children. The current study is; therefore, an attempt to shed light on the oppression of the Oppressed people in the Blacks Community in Alice Walker's The Third Life of Grange Copeland. The aim of this study is to reveal the impact of The Oppression of the Oppressed in the Blacks Community as well as the impact of domestic violence, and to create a new identity for the weak black people in the American society in the recent era, give them a voice, and make them self-confident: socially, emotionally and spiritually. The study brings out the connection of gender and race with the oppression and discrimination that causes psychological trauma in the black community. The novel clearly portrays the multifaceted violence suffered by the blacks, thus, the novelist exposes her themes through the main black characters in order to offer the reader a real insightful depiction and send a message to the entire world about the ill treatment, marginalization and multi faced exploitation that most of black people have been suffering for centuries. Through introducing the concept of oppression, the novelist pursues to reveal her miserable experience of racism that is concerned with the feeling of oppression from the blacks and sometimes from within.

**KEYWORDS:** Death, Murder, Suicide, Home violence, Black Oppression.

## Introduction

All weak black characters live under the tyranny and violence of the strong black characters. This violence occurs because of two different issues referring to the same conception, which is domination. The whites frustrate and dominate black and the black, in turn, impose their violence and domination on the weak black. Black characters suffer an intense kind of frustration that appears in different forms of oppression. The whites try hard to show black people their low and

crucial position in the American society. This is mainly done through oppressing them socially, economically and politically.

This frustration of black people has a great influence on their characters and personalities. Depression and despair, rage and anger are the prevailing traits occurring in their personalities. Withdrawal and despair are –in most cases- more associated with women, and rage prevails in men's attitude the most. Black children are deprived of their simplest rights because of the whites"

oppression. No black child character lives the happiness of his childhood; he is either subject to child labour in the whites' cotton fields, or tyrannised by his violent father. And if oppression continues among the blacks, it will lead them to death, murder, suicide, or they will become unjust and empty their oppression on the blacks weaker than them. In order to ensure the well-being of some blacks at the expense of the misery of black individuals and to exploit their physical capabilities to the fullest extent that may reach them to the paradox of life either because of torture or because of the suicide.

The oppression practiced by the whites towards the Grange's family had devastating effect on them and led them to death, also led them to be as exploited just like a slave and utilized to go to the proprietor of the field on which he worked. Life was terrible for Grange so he turned pessimistic. His money was confiscated on the pretext that it was rent for the house he was keeping. He fled from Georgia to deflect the torment of banks with respect to reimbursement of the obligations. The advance was with a landowner who had a place as white race (Reddy, 2019: 57). Magill, F. N. (1994) explained that:

The history of the Copeland family is a record of the difficulties African Americans face in keeping the notion of kinship alive in a racist world. Walker's narration of the effects of the sharecropping system, a metaphor for America's overarching racism and discrimination, on Grange and Margaret reveals that kinship has a precarious future. If black people do not struggle to maintain it, awful events can happen to them, events more terrible than racism itself. (1432)

Within Grange's household, the subject of the oppression of the oppressed in the black community takes the shape of a sequence in which Grange responds to his lack of control to fight racism by venting his frustration and anger

on his wife and kid. Margaret dismisses Brownfield in response to Grange's bad treatment of her. Brownfield, for his part, responds to his father's indifference by becoming even more violent. He can't appreciate himself since no one cares about him. This is entirely consistent with Spiegel's theory that the downtrodden often becomes the oppressor. According to this idea, oppressors subject their victims to the same level of agony and degradation that they have themselves (Spiegel, 1996: 87). I.e., when someone is treated unfairly, his natural reaction pushes him to end his agony either by venting his anger to another person, or by bringing harm to himself in a way such as committing murder or suicide to get rid of the oppression that made his life miserable.

According to the writer's view, this kind of living accompanied by psychological, physical and emotional stress directly affects the disintegration of family ties of black individuals. Tyron William in his book *Masterplots II African American Literature* (2009), states his view about the bad condition of the black families in Walker's *The Third Life of Grange* as follows:

Grange responds to his lack of power to combat racism by taking his frustration and anger out on his wife and child. Margaret responds to the same environment and to Grange's treatment of her by neglecting Brownfield. Brownfield, in turn, responds to this parental neglect by becoming even more cruel than his father. Thinking that no one loves him, he cannot love himself. He reasons that the only thing he has to give people, whether family or friends, is hate. Brownfield, as an adult entrapped in the same sharecropping system, treats his family with more venom than Grange had treated his. Walker suggests that with each generation the bonds of kinship are

potentially lessened and more damage to black people may occur. (1883)

Grange considers himself a victim of the injustice and oppression he suffered from the white society, as it reflected negatively on his behavior towards family. Thus, he used the most severe forms of oppression with his wife and child to avoid recognition of his inability to take responsibility and provide protection towards his family within the environment dominated by race. This huge amount of physical and emotional violence that he used against them is the only way in which he can hide his real feelings towards them on one side and also to avoid the responsibility that he cannot bear towards them on the other one. So he is bound by the chains of slavery that ended his life in a society ruled by the white race. Grange tried to escape from his bitter and painful reality by making a relationship with Josie as an outlet to escape from the pressures and the injustice he suffers.

The racial discrimination and mistreatment that Grange was subjected to in his life made him a cruel husband, unconcerned with the feelings of those around him, which eventually led him to be a brutal husband to his wife and a cruel father to his son. Therefore, he tries to avenge his failure on her, "But these activities depressed him, and he said things on Wednesday nights that made his wife cry" (12). The bad treatment of Grange toward Margaret was marked by physical and verbal violence, he frequently threatening to leave the house and leave her alone with their son Brownfield in a very humiliating way. This novel contains many indications of Grange's brutality towards Margaret as he travels north leaving her alone and his relationship with Josie as well as his indifference towards his family. His behavior can only be justified by being a reflection of his disappointment at the bitterness of Margaret's betrayal of him.

Sedehi, Talif, Wan Yahya, and Kaur (2015) revealed that Margaret gets nothing but the violence and hopelessness that accompany her as a result of her husband's oppression. The feeling of distress that Grange experienced as a result of being hatred and isolated from society because he is a "black" person forces him to beat and

humiliate his wife. He victimized her for two reasons, first because he believes that she is an undesirable black-skinned person and the second one is that because he believes that she is a weak who cannot defend herself. In fact, everything Grange does and everything he says to his wife expresses his complete contempt for her, or perhaps encourages him. "And he had not needed to tell her who was behind their misery –she knew and then he did not –for someone, something did stand behind his cruelty to her" (176).

Margaret's death granted Grange eternal freedom, and she succeeds in ending her role as a persecuted wife who has suffered so much from her husband's abuse. Her decision to commit suicide was a reaction to her failure to receive the care and attention from her family. Margaret's suicide is considered a selfish decision because she doesn't pay attention to her legal son and abandoned him and failed to be an ideal mother. In fact, she hurts him deeply, caused him bitter pain and bequeathed him a heavy legacy of emotional wounds that she herself inherited from her father and her husband. Walker justifies Margaret suicide saying: "Margaret found relief from her cares in the arms of her fellow bait-pullers and church members, or with the man who drove the truck," (20). This means that she ended the cycle of pain that surrounded her with her death and gained the only true freedom she could find in the other world.

Margaret's primary responsibility as a sharecropper's wife was to work for the survival of her husband and son. W. Lawrence Hogue (1985) explained the situation of Margaret clearly, including the option available to her by saying that: "she can attend to her son when time allows, remain loyal and submissive to Grange, or commit suicide" (49). Margaret finally abandons her role as wife and ignoring her responsibilities as a mammy.

Grange is also a victim of nonverbal emotional violence, a type of Psychological violence used by a person for the purpose of bringing psychological abuse to another person. The abandonment, indifference and betrayal, in addition to the gestures and facial expressions, are only methods used by some characters to hurt the feelings of others, openly or secretly, to stifle

the feelings of the victim and psychologically hurt him.

The illegitimate affair between Mr. Shipley and Grange's wife Margaret destroyed him psychologically and emotionally. As a young black man, Grange, working under his white master Shipley along with his wife Margaret, could not defend the oppression of his manhood as he is a slave. Grange begins drinking to escape from his humiliated situation entering the unconscious world that makes him forget his wife's unfaithfulness, but at the same time it makes him unable even to complete his daily work. Here Margaret responsibilities double because she has to run the house and doing her best to maintain the life between them despite all the difficulties they are exposed to.

Margaret was emptied of her humanity and femininity as a woman due to her husband's intentional and continuous neglect of her began to think of compensating herself for that by taking revenge on her husband. Thus she initially cleans herself up and sits going to wait for guests who never arrive in order to forget Grange's disregard for her; eventually, she begins to follow Grange down the same vicious street to immorality. Margaret, despite her vow not to "sell herself," now readily gives herself to Shipley or anyone else.

Peterson (2001) mentioned that "in an attempt to compete sexually with Grange, Margaret experiences a complete metamorphosis as she transforms from the wholesome, obedient wife to her "new personality" of mistress to many lovers" (34). Not only does Margaret start having open extramarital romances with several men, but she also defies her black woman stereotype by having an affair with white Johnny Johnson, who works for landowner Mr. Shipley. Margaret may feel more powerful than Grange in this sexual struggle by having a sexual relationship with the "better" white guy since she is sleeping with somebody who, in the eyes of repressed blacks, has clout. Margaret exiting Shipley vehicle in the "morning" suggests that she'd been out almost all the night and has no remorse for her actions as she stands "for a moment talking to the driver" (20).

Margaret, in other words, does not depart the car quickly enough to avoid being spotted, but she and Johnny Johnson took the time to "say their good-byes" in public. Margaret's escapades with her "many boyfriends" culminate in the birth of an illegitimate child, whom she neglects later in life. Margaret eventually disregards the white illegitimate kid as she regrets bearing it, emphasising her disdain of motherhood as: "She had sincerely regretted the baby. And now, humbly respecting her husband's feelings, she ignored it" (27). Margaret does not even take the time to educate the child to walk and lives her life as if it were a nonentity.

A person's sense of being undesirable and rejected makes him underestimate himself, as he can only make those around him do not accept his presence, whether they are from his family members or friends. As adult, Brownfield caught up in the same ruthless farmer frame, deals harshly with his family in a more horribly manner than his father. Walker tried to portray the lack of love and respect from the father the reason which leads the son to loss and a loss of sense of self and that is what happened with Brownfield. He did not receive love and respect from his father, which made him an unjust and murderous person in the end, "His father almost never spoke to him" (5). Since Grange fails to express his love for his family, that negatively affects the type of father-son relationship, Brownfield turns into a cruel person who does not know the meaning of love. "I loved my children [...] I loved your mama" the latter confesses to his daughter, Ruth, "I couldn't ever even express my love" (278). He is unable to show love and feelings towards those around him because he did not learn this while he was growing up, especially his father. Here, it can be said that any person subjected to injustice and torture in his life becomes incapable of being a normal human being who can treat others with love and kindness. In fact, the pain he hides prevents him from showing love to people, especially his family.

His painful past and destitute childhood, accompanied by the physical and psychological oppression he received from his father, pushed him to lose his humanity and made him a violence person, especially with his family. He killed Mem

after he male treated and tortured her then ended her life in addition to his daughters. The reason of his crime here is due to the loss of the male identity that the white society robbed and as a result of the accumulation of years of oppression suffered by the black individual in a society based on the principle of race and gender. Consequently, the black individual was stripped of the instinct of affection towards his family to prove his masculine.

One of the most negative influences on Brownfield's life was his father's carelessness towards him which caused him great pain. Grange does not notice or glance at Brownfield in the fields where he has toiled since he was six years old. Even at home, his father refuses to communicate with him "unless they had company. Even then he acted as if talking to his son was a strain, a burdensome requirement" (5).

Brownfield was subjected to the cruelty of his father when he was young, as his father threatened him with weapons, forcing them to flee into the forest, and this led the boy to follow his father's way in his life by doing similar actions against his family as it was the case with his father. In *Grange Copeland* the novelist demonstrates the ways in which the oppression the men face sometimes results in cruelty to wives and the destruction of children" (Christian, 1994:5). In fact, it goes so far as to depict Brownfield as murdering his own wife Mem.

According to Walker, "The child will always, as an adult, do to someone else whatever was done to him when he was a child. It is how we, as human beings, are made" (Walker, Temple: 310). In any case, Brownfield seems to have adopted his father's treatment of his wife and is now treating his own wife in the same manner. In fact, he brutally beats her before murdering his own wife in cold blood. Consequently, Brownfield has been sentenced to life in jail for the savage murder of his wife.

Hedroug (2010), states that Brownfield appears to be compelled and led to strike and insult Mem, to confine her in shacks filled with hay and cattle manure, wooden huts with shattered windows. Despite all the bad circumstances she is going through, Mem makes

another attempt to change her life, but she is killed by Brownfield, who ends all her dreams that she may be able to achieve.

Although no evidence was found to prove her guilt of adultery, Brownfield accused her of doing so to oppress her only. The scene of her getting out of a white man's car on Christmas Eve brings back Brownfield's painful memories of his mother getting out of a white man's truck, angering him and prompting him to point his gun at her. Walker explains Brownfield's reactions saying: "Determined at times to treat her like a nigger and whore ... His crushed pride, his battered ego, made him drag Mem from school teaching ... it was his great ignorance that sent her into white homes as a domestic, his need to bring her down to his level!" (79). His actions are eerily similar to those of a slaveholder. The goal of the slaveholder through the harsh treatment with the slaves while working in the farm was to change them mentally and to make them more submissive to him. Likewise, Brownfield treated her in the same way to bring her under his power, and eventually kill her, as perhaps the only way he could prove his manhood. Kate Cochran (2001) reasoned that killing Mem was the only hope of regaining his control, and he succeeded in wiping her out of existence (89). His killing of Mem is nothing but the end of his life, as he spent a period in prison and lost his attempt to impose his authority and regain his confidence as a man with an entity. Hedroug (2010) comments:

When cruelty violence lives long, it makes forgiveness impossible. It grows hatred too. Mem learns hatred from Brownfield; she learns spite and grudge that impedes (even though he is black too) each time instead of honey "or dear", when he lays his hands on her skin and the children's with hard blows instead of tender caresses. She cannot forgive him when he uses vulgar words to address her and her daughters instead of sweet and coddling ones. His aggressive words and acts really hurt her feelings, and they eventually, numb her heart so

that it can no longer bear love “or even forgiveness” (80).

Mem was not the only victim persecuted by him, during the period that he lived among his children; he did not feel the tenderness of fatherhood at all. Rather, on one cold night, he left one of his children outside, which caused his death. Thus, Brownfield becomes a killer of his family due to the sedimentation of the past, which is reflected in his present which destructs his life and his family at the same time. Brownfield, who started working in the children’s section of Mr. Shipley’s cotton field, was surrounded by silence, exhaustion, and fear as he went to work. As Walker described the situation saying: “The children were too tired to play and were encouraged not to play because of the cotton” (7). At the age of five, Daphne Brownfield’s daughter worked in the cotton plantation, hand cleaning the bushes. Thus, child labour is a source of injustice; their poverty contributes to their mental and physical illnesses.

Another character who presents oppression is Josie a prostitute in town. According to Bates (2005), Josie feels betrayed and overlooked by Grange, and several times she has complained of his injustice and mistreatment. She falls in love with two men, son and father. Although she saved his life when he was in the south, she is rewarded with brutality and cruelty by him. His savage behavior shows his disrespect. He despises her and does not value what she does for him when she rescues him from the greedy Shipley and ‘Evil’ and his white companions (19).

Josie had a bad experience in her first contact with males, which was her bad relationship with her father. He rejects her when she is sixteen, rapes her, and later refuses to keep her in his house as if it was her fault. She considers this moment the separation between what was and what will be, as she was subjected to psychological oppression by being assaulted by the first male in her life who is supposed to protect and care for her. Hami, I. (2016) noted that “In the 16-year-old Josie’s mind, and in most narrative standards, her father should be a strong, hero-like figure; however, he destroys her; she is so traumatized” (64) that she can’t even “say his name” (49). She said to Sister Madeline that “he

rides me” (48). As a result, she is positioned below her father.

After her pregnancy experience, her expulsion by her father and at the age of a “minor” makes her a victim in the eyes of all. As a pregnant teen, Josie faces psychological and physical persecution from her father when he refuses to bring her home again. In his view, she is just a tool in which he empties his instincts and emotions and forgets his role to take care of her and preserve since he is the head of a family. Accordingly, it was the main reason for Josie to become a prostitute and persecuted by the men who entered her life and turned her into a desert full of thorns. Josie’s life is miserable and full of pain since her childhood, so death was the safe haven for her tormented soul “She could grin with her face or laugh out of it or leer through it, but she had forgotten the simple subtle mechanics of the smile” (55).

Grange manipulates Josie when he returns to her because of his love, but in fact he deceives her with the aim of exploiting her physically and financially. Later, Grange uses all kinds of persecution on her as a curiosity for her being a nice lady, because he sees her as an unworthy woman and threatens her if she pretends to be. Black on Black Oppression was applied in this novel especially, when Josie and Lauren tried to sexually exploit Brownfield because of his innocence, as he was accepted by women because of his sexual ability. For him, his sexual strength is the identity that proves his masculinity and his control over women.

Even black preachers who appear virtuous in their morals are subjected to the same change in their personalities and behavior with members of their family, especially their wives, where wives are exposed to aggression and frustration. Thus, no black preacher is seen as being kind to his wife. Out of frustration, they devise various methods to abuse their wives. And the persecution they are subjected to or were subjected to during their lives urges to attack their wives and then abandon them, and thus they are subjected to oppression and then murder if they are forced to do so. This is evident from the killer, who was essentially a religious man before he was imprisoned, as he could not feed his wife as

a result of the persecution he was subjected to, which led him to kill his wife. Josie's father, who is supposed to be a self-righteous pastor, dominates her mother and suffocates her freedom. Uncle Buster (also a black preacher and Grange's uncle) tortures his wife (81). "Grange didn't like him because he had seen him knock his wife, Grange's aunt, through a plate-glass window." (130)

Additionally, the novel *Third Life of Grange Copeland* demonstrates an ignorance of blacks' legal rights. This novel exemplifies blacks' apathy toward courts and justices. If a black victim has been murdered by another black, the victim receives very little justice. Walker demonstrates the injustice meted out to blacks through the novel's incidents, such as Brownfield murdering Mem and being sentenced to ten years in prison; he is paroled after three years of murdering his wife and two other blacks (his wife's mother and aunt). This demonstrates unequivocally how justice was lost in the case of black people. It demonstrates blacks' ignorance and worthlessness when it comes to court and justice. Light punishments for blacks do not demonstrate blacks' favours; rather, they demonstrate black society's negligence.

In this novel, Only Ruth, Mem's youngest daughter, has the chance to avoid being a victim in contrast to her mother, whom Brownfield brutalised and eventually murdered. To ensure a better future for Ruth, Grange even murders his son and arranges for his own demise, which serves as his final contribution. Finally, he offers her a chance: "I ain't...but you do" (246). It is not only Ruth's future that is highlighted at the novel's conclusion, but also the old man who gives his life in order to give Ruth a better life. At the end, Grange saved Ruth's life by assassinating both her father and his son Brownfield. And when Grange shot Brownfield, he shouted to the judge, "Stop, it's justice!" (338). Perhaps he wanted to point out, using the word justice, to make clear what justice actually meant, as he had achieved justice by killing both his son and Ruth's father.

## Conclusion

The researcher has shown that the blacks commit killing and suicide, or the black women turn into prostitutes in order to get rid of their oppression and repression. Notably, murder and suicide emerges as a response to injustice that has been imposed on the blacks. Black characters feel strangled by the white regime or other black characters which imposes racial discrimination, and economic, social and political oppression on them, and which leads them vent their anger by oppressing the weakest black. Hanger, sex, murder, this is the space where man becomes a beast. Therefore, the causes of this violence seem to intertwine with one another. Gender interacts with the effects of race and the socio-economic status to influence power within black male and female relationships that ends in controlling, dominating and oppressing of the strong black on the weak black ones. And if oppression continues among the blacks, it will lead them to either death, murder, or suicide, or they will become unjust or exercise their oppression on the weaker blacks.

Black children are deprived of their simplest rights because of the whites' oppression. No black child character lives the happiness of his childhood; he or she is either subject to child labour in the whites' cotton fields, or tyrannised by his violent father in order to ensure the well-being of some blacks at the expense of the misery of black individuals and to exploit their physical capabilities to the fullest extent.

The study concludes that the blacks can change their lives through reuniting with one another to overcome their obstacles instead of committing suicide or killing. Since Walker's novels end with optimism, this shows that although the black's lives are disturbed by suffering and obstacles, there are elements of optimism from which the blacks can find support and reassurance to begin a new path in life.

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