

## Locating Self In Alice Walker's The Third Life Of Grange Copeland

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**ABSTRACT:** Alice Walker's first novel *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970) deals with issues that we come across in plethora of her later works. The novel explores the aspects of familial cruelty interspersed with larger problems of racism, sexism, and economic deprivation. It focuses on the abuse of black women by their male counterparts mainly their husbands and fathers, the subdued progressiveness of black women, the coming to forefront of "real" black women, a peep into the inner lives of characters, the study of the effects of racism and segregation on individual from an inside perspective, the legacy of parental values passed onto comparatively enlightened future generations, and the use of African American history and cultural traditions for better understanding of life. Walker also highlights the dynamics of oppression, as a force, which does the twin tasks of acting and is acted upon. In present paper an attempt has been made to appreciate a story of the individual's relationship to community, pondering over both the need of self-reliance and moral responsibility.

**KEYWORDS:** Abuse, individual, oppression, racism, violence

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*The Third Life of Grange Copeland* is the story of a young sharecropper who capitalizes on the morbid experience as a sharecropper to emerge enlightened as he mellows down with age. Walker clearly wants to convey the message that it lies within self to free oneself of the gruesome enslavement and oppression by recognizing self-worth by redeeming qualities. Grange passes through three phases of life that are symbolic of three lifetimes: the phase of economic enslavement as a sharecropper in the South, the phase of urban dehumanization in the North, and the phase of self respect and regeneration in his return to the South.

Essentially a bildungsroman *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* reiterates Walker's philosophy of maintaining the individual self in the context of community, elucidating ways of surviving suffering. Chronicling a period of about 60 years the novel narrates a trigenerational recurring patriarchal violence that is deeply amalgamated in the basic nature of black males, a configuration of rage and terror in members of the family, providing a deep insight into the devious nature and destructively abusive behavior of males in the novel. The members of the family try to find some meaning of suffering and thereby transcending that suffering and its vicious cycle of brutality. These characters evolve undergoing anguish with a tripartite reaction of fear and misery, rage and rebellion and serenity and compassion. However as pointed out by Kate Cochran none is able to emerge out of the rut that surrounds him, none is complete, evolved human being. Redemptive Grange finds himself in greater challenge when he tries to change the course of degenerate familial patterns and right some of the wrongs deeply entrenched in his family member's meaningless existence.

Brownfield is perennially enslaved in the oppressive sharecropping cycle, and though his granddaughter Ruth promises order and inclination to grasp true essence of life by working for Civil Rights Movement, the novel ends before she achieves wisdom. Grange achieves resurrection in the final act which though turbulently violent ensures opening the door of change for the future of Copeland biological line. He attains regeneration and transformation in the company of his granddaughter Ruth. By taking the responsibility for his actions Grange is able to love him and pass on the possibility of wholesome living to his granddaughter.

Grange begins his life as a sturdy sharecropper exerting sincerely at the farm of white master, Shipley and follows all the essentials the hypocrisy, the evasions, the duplicities, and the pretensions that a segregationist society demands of the black community. He finds himself perennially and irresistibly prisoner in the oppressive sharecropping system. With an acute sense of absolute marginalization and nothingness, deprivation and emptiness he is seething with hatred that propels him to kill his white master. His anger is not merely ideological or political. Himself a victim of injustice, he copes with the condition of his emasculated manhood by unleashing volley of abuses on his beautiful wife Margaret and his young son Brownfield. He demands absolute subservience from his wife, with "no smiles about him" he takes "every action as a personal affront" (Walker 9-10). Treating his family in a cruel, savage manner, he does not manifest any kind of compassion

because showing his fatherly concern would mean acknowledging his inability to improve his family's deplorable condition. Therefore, sulking continuously, he lashes out at his loved ones threatening and intimidating them. He is totally confused and is incapable of comprehending what's happening around him, seeing too much, feeling too much, dreaming too much not knowing how to handle things.

Grange and his wife make all efforts to achieve little rectitude and integrity. However resigning to their ineluctable fate they accept that they are losers and take to heavy drinking and debauchery. Grange sees himself as a stone, a robot and a cipher. Nicole Smith feels these symbolic self representations are crucial, for none of these three images is capable of autonomous decision making or self determination. Grange feels helpless and entrapped, his manhood injured beyond repair and incapable of taking any self directed action. The only way he can exert his masculinity is by fitting into the role of a power wielding agency and apply the same tactics of oppression that have been used against him. His anguish bursts out in profoundly demonic ways. His frustration reflects a part of animalistic and it reminds one the working of oppression, whereby oppression is a potent instrument that both acts and is acted upon. The oppressed copes with his suffering by exercising the same tools of oppression that are used against him and by turning them upon other people who are even more vulnerable than he is. It therefore becomes extremely difficult for any of the oppressed entity to adopt an, untainted identity and to find the direction and purpose of his own life; oppressed people are the tools of other people and lack autonomous agency. Sartre maintains the conditions of inauthenticity precipitated by oppression actually cause the oppressed person to turn away from his or her insupportable situation[s], and to engage in the psychologically damaging practices of denial. Therefore there is a lack of true meaning, a void that is filled with false and damaging ideas about the self and others.

Set against the background of institutionalized racism and demonic sharecropping system the novel is multilevel study of life and lives lived. It contextualizes the lifetime of a sharecropper enmeshed with a failure and mortality. Grange has been poisoned by the dehumanizing repercussions of southern sharecropping system that fosters mental genocide permanent despair. By tracing the history of Copeland family through three generations, Walker demonstrates the relationship between the racist sharecropping women, and children of that, family inflict on each other. According to Evans through her symbolic use of Grange and Brownfield Walker emphasizes the argument that culture of poverty with its racial underpinnings is essentially dehumanizing. A man who is denied power over his own life finds it easy to disavow the evil he does, even when the target of his abuse is the woman he's married to. Walker succinctly asserts that one has a responsibility to transcend that dehumanization by realizing the futility of violence and the advantage of personal responsibility. In her own words Walker describes *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* as a "novel that is devoted more or less to rigorous realism". The first half of the story therefore delineates the degenerative process of family destruction under the Argus eyed observation against the far reaching hold of southern racism.

The degenerate effects of racism in the first half of the book undergo the process of regeneration in the second half of the book when Grange's second phase of life begins at Harlem. Failing to tolerate sordid poverty and ever increasing domestic unrest Grange enters second phase of his banal life when he decides to move towards the greener pastures of North, which promise some hope and resurrection away from the grip of physical and psychological oppression. To southern black men, the North represents some kind of Promised Land. The land of North is a dream of hope for the Copeland men who want to find some meaning in their meaningless life, "He had come north expecting those streets paved with gold... He had come expecting to be welcomed and shown his way about" (191). But he receives a rude setback. At South, people looked at him as meanest and impotent "but they knew he was there" in North no longer regarded as merely a thing" thinks that "he was not even in existence" (192). New York holds even greater degradation for him. Starvation and sheer apathy push him to criminality for surviving. In the central park, he is a witness to young woman's abandonment by her white soldier lover with money and a ring. He tries to persuade the woman to share half the money left with her. But encumbered with racism and the fear of an African American male she jumps to her death into the chilling pond to escape his approach, "she reached up and out with a small white hand that grabbed his hand but let go when she felt it was his hand" (201).

This rejection makes him realize the severity of his hatred and rage for the white folks. Her death leads to the resurrection of his subjugated manhood in an apathetic earthly life. It is symbolic of the death of his oppressors and oppression, filling him with fresh zeal and zest for confronting life. As she curses and insults him, "he realizes the profundity of his own hatred: He hated her entire race while she stood before him, pregnant, having learned nothing from her own pain, helpless except before someone more weak than herself, enjoying a revenge that severed all kinds of sympathy between them" (199). This incident culminates into his loss of fear and of love "her contempt for him had been the last straw; never again would he care what happened to any of them" (201).

No longer afraid of oppression he has turned the tools of the oppressors against them in order to wrest meaning from their hands. In one of the important quotes from *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* by Alice Walker, "The death of the woman...in a bizarre way...liberated him. It was the taking of the white woman's life

... that forced him to want to try to live again" (97). It is this bizarre kind of liberation that enables him to return to the South and initiate efforts at reclaiming his lost life. With his sanity restored, as a transformed and a complete human being he returns to Georgia. His opinion and respect for African American women has undergone a complete sea change surpassing any he had earlier. After returning home he marries Josie but this seemingly blissful reunion does not last long. He eventually neglects and abandons her. All his efforts are now directed towards creating healthy possibilities for his granddaughter, Ruth, and to creating the conditions that will make it possible for her to dream of defining the meaning of her own life, free from the dynamics of institutionalized oppression.

His battered and awakened self yearns to right some of the wrongs that he has done to his wife and his only son. Margaret has died and Brownfield, an exact replica of his father has also ruined his married life. Experiencing crippling poverty and dehumanizing degradation since childhood Brownfield has acquired the stature of a cruel master destroying his family. He too is entrapped into the mire of the white man's cruel sharecropping system. Feeling subjugated and suffocated, he directs his anger towards his wife and children.

Fully aware that Brownfield's only purpose is to destroy the possibility of wholeness within the family Grange enters third phase of his life when he assumes socially responsible behavior and decides to raise his granddaughter Ruth. Determined to be self-sufficient, he teaches his granddaughter what she will need to survive "whole"(214) in a hostile world. Grange has been enlightened and has discovered that a cycle of hopelessness can only be broken if mistakes are confronted with boldness and life building sacrifices are made for others. Based upon this belief, a bond of love develops between Grange and Ruth, he tells her, "I know the danger of putting all the blame on somebody else for the mess you make out of your life. I fell into the trap myself. (207)

Grange's journey from self abnegation to self resurrection is complete with this realization. Barbara Christian maintains that of all the savage nibblings of racism the most poisonous bite is the abnegation of responsibility for one's own soul. The novel through its juxtaposition of parts, relates the monstrous ramifications that result from blacks believing what society, at every turn, teaches them-that they are not capable of being responsible for their own actions, that white folks are to blame for everything. This abnegation of responsibility is what means to be a "nigger" (54). All acts of violence in the novel reverberate with only this very motif that Grange Copeland communicates to his son Brownfield, "By George, I know the danger of putting all the blame on somebody else for the mess you make out of your life. I fell into the trap myself: and I'm bound to believe that that's the way the white folks can corrupt you even when you done held up before. Cause when they got you thinking they're to blame for everything they have you thinking they're some kind of gods. You can't do nothing wrong without them being behind it. You gits just as weak as water, no feeling of doing nothing yourself. Then you begin to think up evil and begin to destroy everybody around you, and you blame it on the crackers. Hit :Nobody as powerful as we make them out to be. We got our souls, don't we? (207)

The second half of the story unravels Ruth's blooming consciousness under her awakened grandfather, Grange. Experiencing the degeneration and regeneration she is instrumental in giving Grange a new life. Unable to connect to Brownfield as her father she finds Grange ideally fitting in that spot. Grange takes on the responsibility of the father mainly because he feels guilty about his neglect of his own son. Walker here tries to show the possibility of change by introspection, reflection and rectification. Past is no longer an obstacle for Grange's growth but Brownfield is incapable of change because he cannot transcend the pain of his past. He believes in his oppressor and the inevitability of his oppression. Pain of life must be grasped and assimilated, if new pattern is to endure. Spiritual growth is only possible if life is seen as interdependent, synergetic circle of wholeness. Emphasizing that the element of struggle is prerequisite to real and lasting change Walker shows that people who achieve such wholeness act as guiding souls and are beacons of optimism for other struggling and psychologically oppressed people. Ruth's benevolent father image is, from very beginning, the figure of her grandfather. Rejecting the idea of going North with her maternal father, she continues staying with her grandfather, a decision that sees budding of a bond that binds the oldest and the youngest of the Copeland's. A new pattern of harmonious living evolves as Grange, the impotent, rejecting father, becomes an involved, caring human being and the young Ruth both seeks her identity through her elder and yet helps him to understand his own life. Grange tells Ruth about the struggle the black people have been facing since centuries, their trauma, history and culture and how they have been affected by them. She experiences exuberance and elation as her grandfather introduces her to the richness of African culture.

Ruth's love and her questions lead him into self examination and reflection. Through the clarity of the third life she gives him, his first and second lives begin to make sense: "the white folks hated me and I hated myself until I started hating them in return and loving myself. Then I tried just loving me, and then you, and ignoring them much as I could. You're special to me because you're a part of me: a part of me I didn't even used to want. I want you to go on a long time, have a heap of children. Let them know what you made me see, that it aint no use in seeing at all, if you don't see straight."(196)

They celebrate the newly formed bond and goodness by dancing, for as he tells her dance is the essence of black folk: "They danced best when they alone. And dancing taught Ruth she had body and she could see that her grandfather had one too and she could respect what he was able to do with it. Grange taught her untaught history through his dance; she glimpsed a homeland she had never known and felt the pattering of the drum. Dancing was warm electricity that stretched connecting them with other dancers moving across the seas. Through her grandfathers old and beautifully supple limbs she learned how marvelous the grace with which she moved."(133-34)

Ruth's transformation shows the philosophy of change that Walker so believes in ,change not only in person but change in society as well.Ruth is subjected to cruel racism similar to one confronted by her elders. Its only due to the life affirming environment available to Ruth created by her changed grandfather that makes her respond in entirely different manner. Such an enriching environment was not there for Granges son, Brownfield. The shift into Ruths consciousness whether its her relationship to Josie : to the unavoidable racism in school, to her Frankenstein father Brownfield or her own identity as a poor hapless black girl, shows the benedictory impact of Grange's realization for the " survival whole"(21) of Ruth.

Ruth's life acquires meaning and is worth living after her father is killed by her grandf ather calmly and deliberately. Brownfield, a dysfunctional vestige of Grange's first life is incapable of showing any redeeming streak. He orchestrates his doom by not accepting the change because he is incapable of giving his life for anything or to anything. He has to be killed for the sake of Granges third life which is envisaged in Ruth. In this act of murder coexist all elements of the novel; Grange kills his son-the old pattern of kin killing; to rebuild his granddaughter, the new pattern. This means not only thwarting the power of the white folks that Brownfield has come to represent but also over ruling the power of the white judge, the symbol of racist disorder in the south. Grange is well aware that killing his unregenerative son means death for him too. He is shot and he dies as if he were an orphan rocking himself to a final sleep.

Walker achieves what she believes in as writer the spiritual survival, whole of her people. Brownfield's death leads to new beginning which means not merely existence but meaningful living. Granges decision to annihilate his only son is based on his vision of what life could be for Ruth, "And still, in all her living there must be joy, laughter, contentment in being a woman; someday there must be happiness in enjoying a man, and children. Each day must be spent, in a sense, apart from any other, on each day there would be sun and cheerfulness or rain and sorrow or quiet contemplation of life. Each day must be past, present and future, with dancing and winemaking and drinking and as few regrets as possible. Her future must be the day she lived in.....survival was not everything .He had survived. But to survive whole was what he wanted for Ruth"(272).

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