



Rage and Rebellion of Grange Copeland in Alice Walker's the Third Life of Grange Copeland

KEYWORDS

rage, rebellion, compassion, spiritual awakening

Dr. N.Seraman

Assistant Professor, School of English and Humanities,
Central University of Tamil Nadu, Thiruvaur

A. R. Thillaikkarasi

Research Scholar, Monomaniam Sundarnar University,
Thirunelveli.

ABSTRACT Alice Walker's first novel *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* exposes the pattern of terror over a span of sixty years in the lives of black family of sharecroppers. Grange, the little character of the novel represents the soul of southern African Americans. In his first stage of life, he is seen as a man of suppressed thought, he feels less than a man in a land where his entire family is indebted to the white boss. Grange's persistent faithlessness and his increasing frustration, he left his family. However, in his second and third stages of life, some extraordinary changes happened in his life, and he is able to break out the bondage of socially and personally accepted oppression. Finally, progression of his thoughts and actions represent the possibility of men who lift themselves and their fellow human out of their constraints through their self-awareness. Here Grange is in process of becoming aware of his self.

Alice Walker's first novel *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, recounts the experiences of racial and economical oppression in the South. The story begins in rural Georgia during the 1920's. Grange is a sturdy black yeoman and he has the white on his back. In this novel, she exposes the devastating consequences of the racist practices of the twenties and thirties on the lives of the rural Southern blacks and traces the beginnings of the struggles against such practices. African American writers have made serious attempts to extricate black people from the tangle of sufferings by advocating self-esteem and dignity. This novel focuses on the pattern of Grange's life in a series of psychological stages brought out by the oppression that is inflicted upon him and his family.

Alice Walker is a racist fighter as well as a meditative poet and a lyrical novelist. She has taken part in the struggles her people have waged, and she knows the struggles the black people must yet face in this greatest of the world's democracies. She also knows that not even ample bread and wine or power and the applause of one's countryman can give anyone the calm, the freedom that comes with mind's acceptance of its own worth. *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, describes the story of the title character Grange Copeland, whose life is full of debasement and oppression with his wife and son. He is a black tenant farmer who represents as the millions of black sharecropper in the heart of Georgia. He had to suffer all kinds of ill treatment at the hands of white man. Blacks in American society are described as endangered animals, suffered in the cruel hands of racism, poverty and unemployment and a pile of other problem. He feels powerless.

In this novel, Walker graphically lays out his three stages of life. He begins his story as uniquely oppressed in the sharecropping system and in the corresponding environment of domestic violence and consequent self-hatred in mid twentieth century Georgia. He faced his suffering and thereby transcending that suffering and its vicious cycle of brutality. He meets his anguish with triple reactions of fear and misery, rage and rebellion and serenity and compassion. Kate Cochran says that "Walker's characters are the figures of oppression, manifestations of suffering and symbols of the survival methods adopted by the subjugated" (80).

In his first stages of life, Grange is described as a broken man, with hatred and humiliated and ravaged by fear of his white master, Mr. Shipley, who drives the truck could turn him into stone. Brownfield, his son records "when the truck came his father's face froze into an unnaturally bland mask --- became a stone or a robot. A grim stillness settled over his eyes

and he became an object, a cipher" (8). During this time, he is almost silent. He meekly accepts his oppression without fighting. Kate Cochran asserts that "Grange's silence reflects the emptiness of his world, but it also may bespeak his deep sense of fear and misery" (90). He remains miserable and speechless. He lives under these kinds of racial tension. His reaction to freeze is one of fear and rage. The fear of Shipley's superiority, which as Brownfield described, makes him seem like something alien, "the man was a man, but entirely different from his own father" (9).

In his life, Walker intimates that Grange abuses his wife in order to feel less subjugated himself and he initiates one kind of outburst like weeping to relieve from his submissiveness. He threatens his wife and son, taking too much of alcohol. It is a way to get some feeling of power. But he knows that abusing his family only hurts himself, as well as them. At the ends of his drunken mood "he would roll out the door and into the yard, crying like a child in big wrenching sobs and rubbing his whole head in the dirt" (14). His behavior is a part of animalistic. He cannot find the words to express his misery, be manifesting his anguish in more profound ways. Barbara Christian says that,

By tracing the history of Copeland family through three generations, Walker demonstrates the relationship between the racist sharecropping system and the violence that the men, women, and children of that family inflict on each other. (84)

At last, he wants to get away from the grip of physical and psychological oppression; he flees north. To southern blacks, the north represents some kind of Promised Land. The land of north is a dream of hope for the Copeland men, "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 awakening. 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). Walker's characters are alienated in their individual subjugation. Initiation represents the 'sufferer's move toward rebellion. He wonders at his role in his suffering determines his blamelessness, and rebels against the notion that he has brought misery upon himself. Each sufferer in rebellion yearns not only for misery but also for confrontation. Grange tries to fight every white man he sees after the central park incident: While he is begging at central park in New York, he enters the second stage of rage

and rebellion. An incident casts him away from misery and fear towards hate. When he is begging at the central park, he watches a young woman who is being abandoned by her white soldier lover with money and a ring. But she drops it. At this juncture Grange decides to help her by restoring the part of the money and the ring. But she refuses not only the money and a ring, his saving hand also, "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).

When she rejects him, he learns the power of rage. 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 binds of sympathy between them. (199)

The white woman and her death symbolizes 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). Grange's rage is focused on his hatred of whites. His fear of whites has vanished. Each sufferer in rebellion yearns not for mercy, but for confrontation. After central park incident, he tries to fight every white man he sees. He blames the whites for their domestic disharmony, "every white's face he cracked cracked in his sweet wife's name" (205) and yelling in the street of New York "Teach them to hate; if you want them to survive" (202). But his hatred is short lived. He finds new philosophy of hatred is the only way to survive, some one advised him "hatred is bad for a man's mind", he said, "man don't live with his mind along", He live with his mouth and with his stomach. He live with his pride and with his heart. That man's got to eat. That man's got to sleep. That man got to be able to take care of his own life..." (204).

He soon realizes that one man cannot swerve a community of oppressed people. So he determines to create a world that is independent, "from whites, complete and unrestricted", where he can live in "obscurity from those parts of the world he chose" (141). Determined to be self-sufficient, he produces his own food and wine and teaches his granddaughter what she will need to survive "whole" in a hostile world (214).

When Grange first begins to educate Ruth, he cannot conceive of a world in which racial harmony is possible, for the first lesson Grange learned in Harlem and attempts to teach Ruth is to hate white people. He imagines that his decision

to rob and then kill a pregnant white woman by allowing her to drown while cursing him with her "last disgusted breath" is the act that turns him from self-destruction to self-preservation (152). Grange's conviction that to free his manhood he had to kill "whatever suppressed it", and that the murder gave him a "passionate desire to live", lasts until the end of his life (153). Grange recognizes the number of causalities arising from that bitterness that has taken on his own soul. His fear and rage have left him immune to forgiveness, another condition of anguish from which he wants to protect Ruth. His soul has been destroyed by the rage and fear and thus he is unable to forgive whites:

I look in my heart for forgiveness and it just ain't there. The close as I can come to it is a kind of numbness where they concerned... I don't want to set here now numb to half the people in the world. I feel like something soft and 'warm an' delicate an' sort of shy has just been burned right out of me. (267-268)

Grange's soul is maimed. White Grange says, "It is the spoiling of the soul that makes forgiveness impossible. It just ain't in us no more" (268). He has come close to manifesting the major requirement of compassion, recognizing his own lack of control. He continues to associate violence with changes and when Brownfield murders Mem, Grange begins his third life by taking responsibility for his granddaughter. Still another murder will free him from this violent past.

By the end of the novel, he still clutches at the illusion of control of his fenced-in farm, protecting Ruth by killing Brownfield and then shot by himself. His self-sacrifice is his last attempt to regain the ability to see outside him, the condition that he thought is lost with his innocence and faculty to forgive. In this way, Grange has in part found a way to survive whole himself. O'Brien says, "There is a pervasive optimism in this novel, an indomitable belief in the future, and in man's capacity for survival" (195). Ultimately, Grange's move toward compassion takes the form of his determination to see Ruth survive whole. His corporeal death belies the triumph of his love for Ruth over his hatred for whites, and therefore his own spiritual awakening. The focus of the novel's ending is not about the Ruth's future but on this old man. Having transformed his own life, he proved that it is possible for people to change, has used that life to give Ruth a chance. Although much of the Copeland history is painful and horrible, the novel itself is optimistic. In spite of all the sufferings, he is able to break out of the rut of socially and personally accepted oppression.

REFERENCE

- Cochran, Kate. When the Lessons Hurt: The Third Life of Grange Copeland as Joban, Allegory. *Southern Literary Journal* Vol. 34.1(Fall2001):79-99. | Christian, Barbara. *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers*. New York: Pergamon, 1985. | O'Brian, John. ed. *Interviews with Black Writers*. New York: Liver right, 1973 | Mason, Theodore O., Jr. *Alice Walker's The Third Life Of Grange Copeland : The Dynamics of Enclosure*. Callaloo 12.2(1989):297-309. Walker, Alice. *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* 1970. London: Phoenix 2004.