

RACIAL OPPRESSION IN THE THIRD LIFE OF GRANGE COPELAND

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Abstract:

The main motif of The Third life of Grange Copeland is hegemony of the black men on the powerless black women. The crux of the oppression is that the men who suppress their women are also not so powerful. They rule over the women folk intending to exploit her helplessness. The Third life of Grange Copeland speaks of the sharecropping family which was broken under the gloomy pressure of poverty and racial distinction; these two evils distorted their regular life. The sense of fruitless life had brought failure in the life of Grange Copeland. The whole novel is infested with such ill and evil incidents and happenings which were the result of the plight of the black characters.

Key Words: *Racial disparity, slave narratives, oppression.*

Introduction

African writers in America have left their own literary style and content. As a matter of fact, the nuance of Afro-American literature is that its beginning is that of the writings of the black fugitive slaves. They are rightly called '*Slave Narratives*'. Those writings were the autobiographies of the slaves which literally told the painful and melancholic sufferings, trials and tribulations, exploitation, atrocities, racial disparity and sexual violence that made them downtrodden. Being a black writer, Alice Walker, who shows her concerned for the black community in America. Her thesaurus of experiences in all walks of life brimmed with bitter and better incidents, events, instances and experiences enable her to express herself to the fullest extent. Her thematic subjects may be quite different in the sense that she aims at what is conducive to her people. Terms like feminism, exploitation and oppression of the African-Americans, suppression and repression of the black community in America, sexism and sexuality as far as the white and the black races are concerned, racial disparity, humiliating behaviour with the Afro-Americans, gender distinction, patriarchal hegemony, black feminism and '*womanism*'. She writes for the emancipation and empowerment of the black women in America. Walker's writings either prose or poetry, show the struggle for existence and self-identity in the context of white society. She expects equality in every field of life.

The Third life of Grange Copeland is her debut novel which was published in 1970. The novel encompasses the 1960s--period from the Great Depression to the Civil Rights Movement. The setting of the novel is at Georgia with the rural background. Alice Walker's characters convey a complex plot. There are three main characters in the story: Grange, the protagonist, wife of Grange, Margaret, Brownfield, the son of Grange and Margaret. The storyline moves through these three core characters. The other roles are: Star, a boy baby of Grange and Margaret, Mem is the wife of Brownfield, daughter of a preacher who lived in the North; sister of Josie, Ruth is the granddaughter of Grange, daughter of Brownfield and Mem. A role intentionally created by Alice Walker is of Josie who was the owner of the inn called 'Dew Drop'. The eccentricity of Josie is that she fell in love with both the father and the son. Alice Walker means to say that certain people especially, women were of the odd lust to the extent of erotic insanity. She loved Grange and moved towards Brownfield but her love with Grange ended with her marriage with his son, Brownfield.

Grange was a destitute sharecropper who lived at Baker County, Georgia. His earnings all used to

go to the owner of the field on which he worked; it was an indirect way of oppression. His money was debited in the form of the rent of the house in which he dwelled. Eventually, life was unbearable for him and he turned pessimist. One feeble turn in life leads astray. He fled from Georgia to avert the torture of lenders regarding repayment of the debts. The loan was with a landowner who belonged to the white race. He planned to change the course of his life by moving away from the present place. He had to forfeit the fascination with the family. Brownfield also trod on the path of his father. He reached a place where Josie used to run an inn called the Dew Drop which is otherwise called Dewey Inn.

The Dew Drop was, as a matter of fact, a brothel run by Josie. Brownfield made up his mind to settle himself with her and willingly shared bed with her. Illicit relationships followed one after the other. He began his lecherous life by becoming a debaucher, after having slept with Lorene, Josie's daughter and Mem, Josie's niece. At length, Brownfield was fascinated to Mem whom he married in the presence of Josie. His stars did not match hers; they were not on good terms for some time. Unable to control himself, he began beating her black and blue and consequently, he murdered her in cold blood.

His life was stagnant; he was put behind the bars for seven years. When he felt that he could not go anywhere except to Baker County, Georgia, which was his home that was shattered by unwelcoming situations and abrupt twists in his life. The gist and thematic message of the novel *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* can be presented in the form of a statement; the story of the protagonist, Grange who sharecrops for a white owner suppressed and exploited by him; his making a decision of running away from debts and exploitation, he, further experiences failure in the North too. This defeat of his plans compels him to come back to Georgia as a refined man with sanity and repentance.

Racial Oppression

Grange represents the whole black community. It spans to about three decades. The entire novel embodies the life of shareholders in Afro-American context. Racial oppression makes him bankrupt and poverty presses him to kowtow to the humiliating and soul-squeezing circumstances. Grange and Margaret, his wife, indulge in restless work in order to make the intensity of the inimical and dilemmatic condition in their life. Grange sacrificed his responsibilities like a good husband and father because he had succumbed to the pressure of the racial oppression. He had no time to think about his love towards his wife and affection in the case of his children. The black Americans were not given opportunity to grow in any way.

The Afro-Americans were hegemonized by the white masters who did not wish to provide power or prestige. The black slaves were asked to rebel against the white race which is supposed to be superior. The white masters were so hard-hearted that they did not allow the black slaves even to breathe properly and to have a word with the members of their families. The research article entitled *Racialism, Violence and Cruelty in Alice Walker's Works* throws light on the oppression of the white in the context of their racial supremacy and superiority:

Alice Walker, the feminist deals with the oppression of black women and men. Her quest is a new identify for black women, a selfawareness which will make them self-dependent socially, emotionally and spiritually. Racial oppression, general violence, history and ancestry, Civil Rights Movement all these form the sum and substance of her work. It was Alice walker who coined the term '*Womanism*' a form of black feminism that affricates and prefers women's culture, women's flexibility and women's strength. '*Womanism*' according to Alice Walker is not narrowly exclusive; it is committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. In all aspects Alice walker is the brightest star in a galaxy of black American women writers.

Through her writings, Alice Walker seeks recognition of black women in the American society. She expects every Afro-American to be self-aware. She should be independent and self-sufficient in all

matters. Her oeuvre teems with multifarious topics like racial oppression and violence, black history and the black slaves, men and women, who suffered as slaves, revolution in the field of Civil Rights and all issues that are related to the Africans settled in America.

The novels of Alice Walker, in general, disclose the behaviour of the white people towards the African-Americans. The white masters did not have empathy towards the blacks and such devastating attitude of the whites had ruined the psychosomatic balancer of the Afro-Americans. It is now the right moment to know the roots of the enmity that arose between the white and the black races. Even before slavery, there was racial distinction but it was when the Americans brought slaves from Africa, there evolved a strong sentiment of animosity between them. The institution of slavery was the root cause of the oppression and exploitation of the African slaves in America.

Her first-hand experience of the nature of the white society in America made her rebel against the racist community of the Americans. The family of Copeland referred to in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*. The social setup of this small township in America had totally oppressed ambience of degradation and humiliation because of racial disparity. In spite of segregation on the basis of racism, the black people in Copeland had unity among themselves and they remained united and connected in order to face the challenges, risk and suppression. Racial humiliation and devastating attitude of the whites affected the entire family. Eventually, there were quarrels and fights among the members of the same family. The outcome of the profound study of Alice Walker's novels focuses on the racial issues of African-Americans and superiority complex of the whites. The black community in America assumed certain strategies to defend themselves. They tried in vain to transform their black personality into a compatible embodiment of favourable traits. The black women also employed defensive devices towards escaping the gratification of the lust of the white masters.

After the advent of slavery in America, sexual exploitation and molestation were in vogue. It was easily feasible for the Americans to entice the black women towards sexuality for they were in need of some earning and convenience without being tortured. American racism was the worst in the world, which gave birth to many other maladies and evils. To brief the motif of the novel, Alice Walker has concentrated on the inter-racial enmity and detestation. Sexual exploitation of the women slaves was common in those days. The white slave traders abused them and they made use of the familial disharmony of the black servants. The whites knew the mental setup and economic level of the slaves. The conjugal life of the black women was also not harmonious; their husbands had gone astray and many a time they were working on the farms and plantations and they were drunkards too. Some had kept-women. Their men had several personal issues. White people knew well how to persuade and entice the black women to quench their lusty thirst.

The Third Life of Grange Copeland presents the colonial period with reference to the critical aspects relating to the black people. As a matter of fact, the novel deconstructs the black identity. Alice Walker interrogates the white race the destructive behaviour and humiliating position given to the African-Americans. She questions the demoralizing impact of their ruinous hegemony, oppressive power and so-called racial superiority. Her novel poses a question to the white race about the cause of Grange Copeland's unethical and immoral lifestyle; she seems to ask the rival race: 'Who is responsible for the plight of the protagonist?' At the end of the novel she herself seems to answer the question that the racist stratification of the white society is to be blamed. The racist ideology has driven the Afro-Americans insane and immoral. Their humiliating behaviour and exploiting motive of the whites with the black slaves made them scapegoat.

Conclusion

Before concluding the paper, it is essential to gather the general gist and motif of the novel *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*. Alice Walker has tried to disclose the position of the African-American people. She has dealt with many issues of her community in America issues like racial, national, and gender

identities. These problems have different and complicated threads woven together intricately that they have become a chaotic jumble. Magnanimity and multiplicity of their trials and tribulations had put them in the dangerous zone. It had become nearly impossible to bring all the stray threads into the form of a strand. Struggle of the black people, both men and women, faced twofold troublesome at the hands of the white race and the other is disharmony at home. The challenging circumstances in their lives and the plight that oppressed like their white masters had pressed them to move towards indefinite directions. Grange returns with new avenues and aspirations. The cathartic end of the story gives a lesson to the whole of the black community that oppression should be opposed and protested in all circumstances. Going with the wind or sailing with the waves does not fetch any welfare. Struggle for existence claiming rightful justice on humanitarian grounds is the birthright of man, may he be of any colour or race, irrespective of gender.

At last, the protagonist learns and makes up his mind to lead a true and justified life, may he be entangled in any circumstances. Transformation, late in life, enabled nobody to grow favourably and optimistically. In the end of *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* Alice Walker seems to say that the process of existentialism disconnects all the members of one's family, dehumanizing the social values. Grange feels a liberated soul only after passing through countless tests in his life.

References

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