ALICE WALKER’S VIEW ON DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN BLACK HETEROSEXUAL LOVE RELATIONSHIPS AS REFLECTED IN HER NOVEL THE THIRD LIFE OF GRANGE COPELAND

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Alice Walker’s first novel The Third Life of Grange Copeland is a novel that is eloquent and insightful in exploring the cause and the chilling effects of domestic violence in black heterosexual love relationships. In this novel, Walker identifies that the severe racial discrimination in American society has prevented black men to perform the prescribed traditional male role of the family provider and protector. As a result, they experience the powerlessness, low self-esteem, feelings of ineffectiveness and insecurity that in turn cause them to demand that their partners and family members treat them like a man and show them respect. Any challenge, any question from his partner can be interpreted as yet another attempt to break their already insecure and fragile sense of self. Thus, they inflict violence and abuse their partners and children to regain their denied masculinity. Having been occupied with the attempt to regain their denied manhood, Grange and Brownfield’s family lives were trapped in the cycle of violence and abuse. Moreover, Brownfield’s stubborn insistence to regain his denied manhood had brought him and his father to the tragic ending of their life story. Echoing Walker’s belief that violence brings only destruction, the life of her female characters who had suffered greatly from the male characters’ violence and abuse ended up tragically also.

Key words: domestic violence, black heterosexual love relationships, racism, denied masculinity.

I. INTRODUCTION

In the early 1970s, black woman intellectuals began to bring to the fore issues concerning African-American gender relations. In her essay, Toni Cade Bambara argued that one of the most characteristic features of the black community was the antagonism between black women and men (1970:106). It
has been suggested that black women frequently experienced violence, emotional abuse, and sexual harassment from black men.

As a black feminist writer, Alice Walker expresses her concerns over the antagonism between black women and men in her first novel *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970). This novel is mainly the story of Grange Copeland’s three lives. Grange’s first life was set in the deep South, where he was exploited as a sharecropper. The second life was set in New York, where he was forced to take “dirty” jobs, such as working as a hustlers; selling bootleg whiskey, drugs, and stolen goods; and selling black women to white men. The third was set again in the rural South, where he redeemed his sins in the previous two lives by breaking the cycle of physical and emotional abuse that overwhelmed his own and his son’s lives. He did this by taking responsibility for the life and education of his granddaughter Ruth after his son Brownfield was put in prison for killing his wife Mem. It also tells the story of the life of Grange’s son Brownfield. Brownfield’s life story was brought to the fore while Grange was struggling with his own life in New York. As Brownfield's life became a repetition of his father’s first life, it intensified Grange’s wrong deeds to his wife and son. Unlike his father, however, Brownfield’s life became more complicated and his relationship with his wife became more troubled because of his specific condition.

Walker argues that this novel is about a man, Grange Copeland, and his son Brownfield, but it is the women and how they are treated that colors everything (2000: 250-251). Despite Walker’s argument, the novel is, as Maria Lauret suggests, an “apprentice novel” with patriarchal plot and feminist perspective; it is still “a novel in which men take center stage, with women characters in a subordinate role” (2000: 31-37). Nonetheless, it is the novel’s patriarchal plot and feminist perspective that effectively provides us with Walker’s total exploration of the cause and chilling impact of the antagonism between black women and men.

The intra-familial relationships that are explored in this novel are characterized by the intra-familial violence, or also known as domestic violence.
The term domestic violence, according to Evelyn C. White in her book *Chain Change: For Black Women in Abusive Relationships*, is a general term used to describe the battering—the actual physical act of one person beating another—or abusive acts within an intimate relationship. Physical abuse, emotional abuse and sexual abuse are all forms of domestic violence (1994: 4). White further suggests that domestic violence is recognized as a deeply-rooted problem in American society (Ibid.: 13). Thus, it is interesting to discuss the cause and the devastating effects of the domestic violence committed by the two main male characters Grange Copeland and his son Brownfield towards the women in their life.

The writer believes that not only is the discussion interesting, but it is also enlightening since domestic violence issue should always be a considerable issue in “all societies, which are culturally and legally supportive to words and actions that keep women physically, emotionally and economically subordinate to men” (Ibid.: 7). In this country, domestic violence, or what we call as “Kekerasan Dalam Rumah Tangga (KDRT)” issue, in recent years has become a public discourse and women activists have taken actions to deal with this problem. This paper hopefully gives a significant contribution, at least in its attempt to bring to the fore the issue concerning domestic violence to our own community.

II. DISCUSSION

As discussed by Patricia Hill Collins, in order for us to understand black men’s abusive behavior that impedes black heterosexual love relationships, we need to put it in “situation” (2000: 158). Then it is crucial to decide the span of time and the setting of place of the story. Since *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* does not employ a precise dating, we may assume that the opening year of the story was 1920s when relatives from Philadelphia came to visit the Copelands in their “new 1920 Buick” (3). The ending was around 1960s when the Civil Rights Movement activists began to “invade” Southern Georgia. The setting of place moved to New York and to the urban South for a brief period. However, most of the time, the story was set in the rural South. Thus, to put the
relationships in “situation,” we need to know the condition of sharecropper families in the rural South at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Alice Walker, herself born the daughter of a Southern sharecropper in rural Georgia, is able to give an actual description of the suffering that black sharecropper families had to bear in Southern Georgia in 1920s and 1930s. Her description resembles Arnold H. Taylor’s description of the real condition of black sharecropper families in the deep South at the beginning of the twentieth century. Taylor describes how the shadow of slavery psychologically and economically ruled over black farmers. Refusing the arrangement reminiscent of slavery—to work in gangs under supervision as wage laborers—many black farmers turned to the tenant and sharecrop system, hoping that they would have some control over their lives and labor and over that of their families by renting land (1976: 71-75). However, in practice, they were still unable to become independent peasants because the typical arrangement—either share-tenantry or sharecropping—implied a high degree of planter supervision and control (Mandle, 1978: 46). Thus, as concluded by Mandle, “these forms of tenantry at once therefore represented a system which provided a more reliable labor force to planters than wage labor would have, but at the same time implied little diminution in planter authority” (my italics) (Ibid.).

Like wage laborers, sharecroppers essentially offered nothing but their labor to the production system. Unlike wage laborers, however, sharecroppers did not receive a money wage because the sharecrop system was basically a system under which “the crop produced on the land assigned to the tenant was divided between the tenant and the landlord.” (Taylor, 1978: 75-76). In the division, “when the landlord furnished “land, shelter, rations, seed, tools, stock and stock feed,” his share was usually from one-half or two-thirds of the crop and when he furnished less, he usually took one-third of the crop (Ibid.: 76).

Taylor further gives a description of how the sharecropping arrangement often degenerated into a system in which the tenants were grossly exploited by the planters.
Frequently the tenant’s share of the crop was insufficient to pay off his debt at the end of the year. The process was repeated year after year with the sharecropper going deeper into debt. His only change for relief from the regimen would be to leave the plantation and forfeit the debt. On the new plantation the process would begin over again, and the tenant would remain trapped in the system. (Ibid.)

This was also experienced by Grange, and later on his son Brownfield.

On Wednesday, as the day stretched out and the cotton rows stretched out even longer, Grange muttered and sighed. He sat outside in the night air longer before going to bed; he would speak of moving away, of going to North. He might even try to figure out how much he owed the man who owned the fields. The man who drove the truck and who owned the shack they occupied. But these activities depressed him, (12)

Although blacks were not the only victims of this system, they suffered most from this form of exploitation because they were politically powerless and socially proscribed (Taylor, 1978: 77). As black sharecroppers offered nothing but their labor, consequently they were essentially in the same category as the wage laborers and frequently powerless to the landlords. They took without being allowed to question what was offered to them. Taylor concludes that most sharecroppers were suffering in their lives. “Their incomes were meager, their houses were often shacks unfit for human habitation, and “poverty, diseases, and illiteracy” characterized their general condition (Ibid.).

Grange’s first life and Brownfield’s life were under this repressive condition. All the family members had worked real hard to meet their needs—Grange, his wife Margaret and their little son Brownfield, still poverty and debt overwhelmed their life. Grange and Margaret had to leave Brownfield unattended since he was a baby because they had to work to survive (6). As a result, Brownfield grew up in starvation and diseases (7). When he was six, Brownfield himself had to work in the cotton field, in the company of other child workers (7). The family lived in a cabin of two rooms that was in a very poor condition (13). Brownfield also grew up illiterate because going to school was never in his parents’ capacity (14). When he became a family man himself,
having been hopeless to escape the sharecropping arrangement, Brownfield’s own life became “a repetition of his father’s [first] life” (54).

It was a year when endless sunup to sundown work on fifty rich bottom acres of cotton land and a good crop brought them two diseased shoats for winter meat, some dried potatoes and apples from the boss’s cellar, and some cast-off clothes for the children from his boss’s family. It was the summer that he watched, that he had to teach, his frail five-year-old daughter the tricky, dangerous and disgusting business of handmopping the cotton bushes with arsenic to keep off boll weevils.

[...]
His indebtedness depressed him. Year after year the amount he owed continued to climb. He thought of suicide and never forgot it, even in Mem’s arms. [...] He prayed for a descent job in Mem’s arms. But like all prayers sent up from there, it turned into another mouth to feed, another body to enslave to pay his debt. He felt himself destined to become no more than overseer, on the white man’s plantation, of his own children. (53-54)

Grange and Brownfield’s lives affirm how the shadow of slavery psychologically and economically ruled over black farmers in the deep South in the beginning of the twentieth century. Since they could offer only their labor, black sharecroppers like Grange and Brownfield became not only economically dependent on, but also psychologically inferior to their white landlords. As young Brownfield noticed, Grange “became a stone or a robot” around “the man who drove the truck” (8). Young Brownfield also noticed that “[s]ome of the workers laughed and joked with the man who drove the truck, but they looked at his shoes and at his pants legs or at his hands, never into his eyes, and their looks were a combination of small sly smiles and cowed, embarrassed desperation” (8). Young Brownfield was then taught to show his own respect and fear to “the man who drove the truck.”

Once the man touched him on the hand with the handle of his cane, not hard, and said, with a smell of mint on his breath, “You’re Grange Copeland’s boy, ain’t you?” And Brownfield had answered, “Uh huh,” chewing on his lip and recoiling from the enormous pile of gray-black hair that lay matted on the man’s upper chest and throat. While he stared at the hair one of the workers—not his father who was standing beside him as if he
didn’t know he was there—said to him softly, “Say ‘Yessir’ to Mr. Shipley,” and Brownfield looked up before he said anything and scanned his father’s face. The mask was as tight and still as if his father had coated himself with wax. And Brownfield smelled for the first time the odor of sweat, fear and something indefinite. […] Brownfield, trembling, said “Yessir,” filled with terror of this man who could, by his presence alone, turn his father into something that might as well have been a pebble or a post or a piece of dirt, […] (9)

From his cousins, young Brownfield knew “how his father was owned and how [his cousins’] father escaped being owned by moving North” (10). Since then Brownfield’s own feeling of the white masters was a combination of intense fear and deep hatred.

“See you do your work good,” the old man said sharply, clearing his throat and turning in the direction of his house. “You and Mem ain’t bad hands,” he said almost as an afterthought. “Glad to be keeping you in the family!” But this is 1944! Brownfield wanted to scream; instead he said “Yassur,” and waited until Captain Davis was three yards away before he moved. “I ought to stick my feed knife up in him to the gizzard!” he whispered, nervous sweat running down his sides. He walked home slowly, kicking rocks and bushes. (89)

Through her exploration of Grange and Brownfield’s lives, Alice Walker confirms what has been concluded by Robert L. Hampton that racial domination has prevented black men in many cases from fulfilling the traditional male role of head of the household and provider (1987: 96). It has been indicated that African-American men are influenced by heterosexist, Eurocentric gender ideology, particularly ideas about men and women advanced by traditional family ideals (Ibid.). Traditional family ideals ascribe the traditional male role as head of the household and provider and the traditional female role, as being subject to patriarchal domination, as housekeeper and consumer. Hampton further concludes that, “as long as they attribute themselves to the mainstream standards for appropriate masculine role, black men are confronted with what they are and what they have been led to believe they should be” (Ibid.).

Evelyn C. White suggests in her book that, “[b]ecause of institutionalized and individual racism in American society, black men, in
particular, have experienced much of the powerlessness, low self-esteem, feelings of ineffectiveness and insecurity […] (1994: 20), which result from the failure to maintain their masculinity. White further suggests that, “many black men who feel, for good reason, that they have no power and little impact on the American culture at large […] are more likely to demand that their partners and family members treat them like a man and show them respect. Any challenge, any question from his partner can be interpreted as yet another attempt to chip away at his already insecure and fragile sense of self” (Ibid.: 21). It has been suggested also that black men regard the possession of a wife and children as an indication of masculinity, a recognition that they, too, are capable of performing the social role in American society (Taylor, 1976: 164).

Walker’s further exploration of the destructive effects of racism on Grange and Brownfield’s families also reveals that it was the oppressive condition resulted from the severe racial discrimination that stimulated the two male characters to inflict violence and emotional and sexual abuse on their wives and children. As they were incapable to save their wives and children from “slavery” and could only feel “pity and regret for them,” not only did it intensify the fact that Grange and Brownfield failed to become the family provider, but it also proved that they failed to become the family protector. Since they could not be “the man of the house,” they were incapable of attaining masculinity. Having been incapable of attaining their manhood, Grange and Brownfield experienced powerlessness, low-self esteem, feelings of insecurity, and ineffectiveness. These encouraged them to turn to their wives and children to regain their denied manhood. It is the powerlessness to become the family provider and protector that drove them to treat their wives and children the way he treated them. The low-self esteem, feelings of insecurity and ineffectiveness made them feel the need to act as if they owned their wives and children and thus tended to control them. In order to show their capability to control, Grange inflicted violence and emotional abuse on his wife and emotional abuse on his son Brownfield and Brownfield himself inflicted violence and emotional and sexual abuse on his wife and violence and emotional abuse on their children.
Robert L. Hampton suggests that, “when the institutional means for attaining cultural goals of masculinity are not available (anomie), an individual must find alternative means of adapting” (Hampton, 1987: 96). Having failed to achieve cultural goals of masculinity through traditional means, Grange and Brownfield adopted deviant ways from the normative structure of goal attainment. Grange adopted “innovative strategies,” which included toughness and violence, and “rebelliousness” and “rebellion” through alcohol use and sex. Brownfield was also engaged in “innovation” through “violence and “retreatism” and “rebellion” through alcohol use and sex (Ibid.: 97-98).

The days of the Copeland family were colored by Grange’s exhaustion, frustration, depression, and abusive behaviors (11-12). Every late Saturday night, the tensions got worse than the other days and nights. “Grange would come home lurching drunk, threatening to kill his wife and Brownfield, stumbling and shooting off his shotgun. He threatened Margaret and she ran and hid in the woods with Brownfield huddled at her feet” (12). Every Saturday night, like his father, Brownfield came home full of whiskey, beat his wife Mem brutally and threatened to kill her (90-91). To ease his frustration and depression, Grange needed to see Josie, “the whore of his lusty youth” (177). To ease his injured pride and battered ego, not only did Brownfield “[accused] Mem of being unfaithful to him, of being used by white men, his oppressors […],” but he also felt the need to come back to Josie (60).

Grange was playing tough by withdrawing into himself and away from his son. Young Brownfield recognized his father’s typical gesture, which showed that he felt helpless. However, as he did not want to look helpless, Grange became silent. “[Grange] merely shrugged. […] After each he was more silent than before, as if each of these shrugs cut him off from one more topic of conversation” (14). Grange quarreled a lot with his wife, but refused to speak to Brownfield if they were alone. Grange acted as if “talking to his son was a strain, a burdensome requirement” (5). If Grange had to speak to his son, he would speak harshly. “And [Brownfield] most hated him because even in private and in the dark and with Brownfield presumably asleep, Grange could not bear to touch his son with his hands” (21). By keeping himself away from his son, Grange was
inflicting emotional abuse. ”And [Brownfield] knew […] that he hated him for everything and always would” (21).

Brownfield was more abusive to his wife Mem than his father was to his two wives Margaret and Josie. While Grange’s abuse was more in words, Brownfield was abusive in both words and actions. When he thought Mem challenged his already insecure and fragile sense of self, Brownfield became more violent and abusive. This was because she came from a very different background from him. Brownfield, who never had a chance to go to school, ended up being illiterate and ignorant. On the contrary, Mem was an educated woman. She managed to finish her high school in Atlanta. Shortly after the first time she met Brownfield, she began teaching grade school. Since the very beginning, Brownfield was aware of their different background and felt that his masculinity was threatened. “Had Mem bypassed him because he was not a well-taught man? His pride was hurt. Gloomily he thought of his poverty and his dependence on Josie and Lorene […] (my italics) (48).

After his father’s desertion and his mother’s suicide, Shipley offered Brownfield to work for him. When he refused Shipley’s offer, he announced his refusal to live as a sharecropper like his father. “He would be his own boss” (24). However, being illiterate and ignorant, Brownfield was then willing to become Josie’s “kept man.” He never even felt necessary to draw a salary from Josie (47). Having no money when he decided to marry Josie’s niece Mem, the only choice left for an illiterate and ignorant man like Brownfield was to become a sharecropper. Thus, Brownfield hopelessly walked into the trap of sharecropping because of his illiteracy and ignorance.

Brownfield’s concern over his different background from Mem suggests that he had carried within him an internal problem when they got married. Soon after they were married and had children, Brownfield had to also confront the external problems from the condition in which the severe racial discrimination denied his capability to become the man of the family. The internal problem from inside his household was intensifed by the external problems from the outside. As a result, Brownfield’s problems with his wife became more intense and the effects were more devastating for the family.
Like any black men who adopted the mainstream standards of masculine role, Brownfield thought he could not be a man unless he was in charge in his own household (87). As he realized that Mem was more educated and thus more assertive and stronger than him, he was already highly threatened by his wife even before she really challenged his denied manhood. Any challenge, any question from his wife was interpreted as yet another attempt to chip away at his already insecure and fragile sense of self.

[...] He could not stand to be belittled at home after coming from a job that required him to respond to all orders from a stooped position. When she kindly replaced an “is” for and “are” he threw her correction in her face.

[...] In company he embarrassed her. When she opened her mouth to speak he turned with a bow to their friends, who thankfully spoke a language a man could understand, and said, “Hark, mah lady speaks, let us dumb niggers listen. [...] He could not stand having his men friends imply she was too good for him. [...] (no emphasis added) (56)

Because of his injured pride and battered ego, Brownfield became violent to his wife. He became mean to Mem because he wanted to make sure that Mem did not even have a chance to challenge his ability to “own” and control her and thus to really confront his already denied masculinity.

When his life gradually became more difficult because of sharecropping, after accusing his wife of being unfaithful, Brownfield determined to change his wife completely (57). This, again, proves that Brownfield thought his masculinity was highly threatened by his wife’s background as an educated woman. Therefore, for Brownfield, changing his wife completely means to force her to “come down” to his level. In order to force Mem to “come down” to his level, Brownfield needed to first change her proper speech and manners and her interest in knowledge. As he was so overwhelmed by his inferior feeling towards his wife, he then felt the need to change everything about her (57). In doing so, Brownfield inflicted unbearably withering emotional abuse to his wife. As the sharply declined family life frustrated and depressed him more and more, Brownfield started to physically abuse his wife Mem.
Over the years they reached, what they would have called when they were married, an impossible, and unbelievable decline. Brownfield beat his once lovely wife now, regularly, because it made him feel, briefly, good. Every Saturday night he beat her, trying to pin the blame for his failure on her by imprinting it on her face; and she, inevitably, repaid him by becoming a haggard autonomous witch, beside whom even Josie looked well-preserved. (no emphasis added) (55)

Brownfield also inflicted sexual abuse to his wife since having sex under the severe physical and psychological abuse of her husband became a tormenting activity for her.

In response to many criticisms that Brownfield does not represent the right image because he is too mean, Alice Walker argues that many black men provide her with the real portrayal for Brownfield’s characterization (in Tate, 1985: 177). As shown above, Brownfield extreme meanness can be logically explained by understanding his specific condition. Then it can be argued that it is by presenting Brownfield’s life story that Walker is eloquent and insightful in exploring black heterosexual violent relationship.

In their “chaotic” lives, both Grange and Brownfield neglected their children. They were so busy feeling depressed with their lives that they forgot there were their children who were in a great bewilderment trying to grasp the meaning of the chaos. Young Brownfield hated his parents for their negligence. “What Brownfield could not forgive was that in the drama of their lives his father and mother forgot they were not alone” (20). However, Brownfield was worse than his father for he treated his daughters not as human children. “He scolded Ornette, who had come a year after Daphne, with the language he would use on a whore. And the baby Ruth he never touched” (74). Brownfield’s first daughter called herself “The Copeland Family Secret Keeper” (110) and more forgiving of his father’s abuse (111) for she could still remember “the good old days” when his father was still a good father. His second daughter Ornette, however, was rebellious to her parents. Ornette learned to toss her head at her father and she was bold and did not respect her mother for she believed she married the wrong man (112). As Brownfield himself ended up hating his father
because of his emotional abuse to him, Brownfield’s daughters were afraid of him and gradually hated him for the abuse he did to them and their mother.

When his wife decided to sign the lease of a new shining house in town without his consent and told him that she got a job in town, Brownfield thought Mem really challenged his ability to “own” and control her and confronted his already denied masculinity. In his effort to save his dignity, Brownfield became highly defensive and unreasonably stubborn. He refused the idea to go to town to leave poverty. When he said that, “I am a man and I don’t working in nobody’s damn factory” (no emphasis added) (87), Brownfield unconsciously showed that he felt his masculinity was highly challenged and confronted by his wife. Consequently, his violent and abusive behavior became worse as well. When at one moment Mem was able to make him promise to stop abusing the family under a pointing gun, Brownfield’s extremely injured pride and battered ego prevented him to admit that his wife decision to move to town was a good decision. In his “acceptance,” “Brownfield lay in wait for the return of Mem’s weakness” (101).

Alice Walker argues that black men tend to feel they are being challenged by strong and assertive black women. In town, Brownfield could not stand the fact that his wife was right; his work was much easier and his family’s life gradually became much better. For Brownfield, the improved condition of his family was unbearable because it showed that “[h]is wife had proven herself smarter, more resourceful than he” (103). Because of his extremely injured pride and battered ego, instead of taking over the responsibility from his sick wife to provide betterment for his family, Brownfield determined to take his wife and children back to poverty. He succeeded when Mem’s illness that his violence and abuse had caused became worse and made her unable to work and pay the lease. He intentionally refused to take over the responsibility to pay the lease because he saw his opportunity to make her “come down” again. He succeeded to drag Mem and the children back to poverty by forcing them to go back to the deep South and live in Mr. J L’s shack (106).

It is interesting to notice that when Grange and Brownfield were unable to achieve cultural goals of masculinity through traditional means, they adopted
the deviant ways of “retreatism” and “rebellion,” not only through alcohol use, but also through whoredom. Both Grange and Josie needed Josie to regain their masculinity. Grange explained to his first wife Margaret that “Josie was necessary for his self-respect, necessary for his feeling of manliness,” and that “if [he] [could] never own anything, […], [he] [would] have women” (177). This “confession” represents Walker’s confirmation of black men’s liability to attain masculinity through sex.

Grange and Brownfield psychologically abused and used Josie. Both men seemed to think that she did not deserve a proper treatment because of her lower status as a prostitute. Grange selfishly explained to his wife Margaret that “[he] love[d] [her], he had assured her, because [he] trust[ed] [her] to bear and raise [his] sons; [he] love[d] Josie because she [could] have no sons” (177). When he decided to go to North, Grange left Josie without words. If he could leave his wife Margaret and Brownfield without words, he would never bother to say anything to Josie. When he married Josie later, he did not do it because of love, but for her money. Although he realized that he had done wrong to the women in his life, Grange only tried to right his wrong deeds for a short time in his third life. When he was occupied with his granddaughter’s life and education it was easy for Grange to gradually neglect Josie. Brownfield himself was willing to be Josie’s “kept man” because he had no money and nowhere else to go. When he was frustrated with his life as a sharecropper, he came back to Josie for consolation and support money. When he finished his prison sentence for killing his own wife, Brownfield manipulated Josie, who envied Grange and his granddaughter’s relationship, to help him take his daughter Ruth away from Grange.

Josie’s characterization provides us with Alice Walker’s exploration of how a certain condition in which one lives can influence the way one acts and reacts. Josie is presented as a possessive woman. Her great love for Grange became her motivation to do anything for him. This can explain why Josie was sometimes good and sometimes mean to Grange. Her decision to make Brownfield her “kept man” was because she wanted to give Grange a lesson for deserting her. Her willingness to cooperate with Brownfield to take Ruth away
from Grange was because she wanted to win back his love to her (204-205). In this case, Walker presents what Patricia Hill Collins calls the “love and trouble tradition” in black women’s relationship with black men (Collins, 2000: 151-160). Walker shows that, regardless of their abusive relationships, black women still needed black men. Like blues women (Ibid.), Walker identifies black women’s relationship with black men as a source of strength, support and sustenance.

Josie’s possessiveness can be logically explained by understanding her condition. Having been sexually and physically abused by her own father, Josie grew up to believe that nobody would protect her and that she had to take care of herself. Having nothing but her sex appeal, Josie learned to use it to manipulate men through whoredom in order to survive. Like any women, however, Josie desired men’s love and protection. Her desire became stronger because of her background as an abused child. Josie’s obsession for men’s love and protection made her vulnerable from being used and abused by them. When a woman like Josie really loved a man, the fear that she would not be loved and protected by the man encouraged her to become possessive. From Josie’s case, it can be learned that possessive love can be harmful for women for it can make them more vulnerable from being used and abused by men.

The “love and trouble tradition” also characterized Grange relationship with his first wife Margaret and Brownfield relationship with his wife Mem. Young Brownfield noticed his mother’s submissiveness to his father.

[...] Brownfield frowned. His mother agreed with his father whenever possible. And though he was only ten Brownfield wondered about this. He thought his mother was like their dog in some ways. She didn’t have a thing to say that did not in some way show her submissiveness. (5)

When their life got more and more difficult and Grange became abusive, Margaret only fought him back with words. However, when her husband started to see Josie, “the whore of his lusting youth” (177), Margaret felt the need to take revenge by doing the same thing Grange did to her; bedding down with other men. In her revenge though, Margaret did not lose her love and respect for
Grange. Walker interestingly narrates Margaret’s love and respect for her “unreliable and unfaithful” husband.

Depression always gave way to fighting, as if fighting preserved some part of the feeling of being alive. It was confusing to realize but not hard to know that they loved each other. And even when Margaret found relief from her cares in the arm of her fellow bait-pullers and church members, or with the man who drove the truck and who turned her husband to stone, there was a deference in her eyes that spoke of her love for Grange. […] She had sincerely regretted the baby. And now, humbly respecting for her husband’s feeling, she ignored it. (my italics) (20)

It appears that jealousy became Margaret’s primary motive to take revenge on Grange. She was so overwhelmed by her jealousy that she thought she needed to make Grange jealous of other men by doing the same thing Grange did to her. By making Grange jealous, she hoped to win back his love to her. However, without realizing it, her revenge had a different impact on Grange. When she bedded down with the white man who made his life suffered, Grange felt that Margaret challenged his ability to “own” and control her, and thus, she confronted Grange’s masculinity. “This Grange had not been able to bear. His choice was either kill her or leave her. In the end he had done both” (177).

Margaret did not surprisingly react to Grange’s desertion. It can be assumed that it was a natural reaction out of “great love.” When Grange left her, she was incapable of being furious because she was more overwhelmed by her hopeless feeling (21). It seems true that “fighting preserved some part of the feeling of being alive.” As Grange was not around “to be loved and fought at the same time,” she felt hopeless of having to live alone in the oppressive condition. In such condition, the only choice for Margaret was to commit suicide after poisoning the baby (21). In this way, Grange eventually “killed” his own wife.

In the first years of their marriage when life had not been difficult, Mem was a good wife for her good husband Brownfield. Mem and her kindness became Brownfield’s consolation of the harsh life.

Even the shadow of eternal bondage, which plagued him constantly those first years, could not destroy his faith in a choice
well made. For Mem was the kind of woman who sang while she cooked breakfast in the morning and sang when getting ready for bed at night. And sang when she nursed her babies, and sang to him when he crawled in weariness and dejection into the warm life—giving circle of her breast. He did not care what anybody thought about it, but she was so good to him, so much what he needed, that her body became his shrine [...]. (49)

When their life got difficult and Brownfield started to abuse her, Mem “accepted [her husband] in total passivity and blankness, like a church” (54). When their life got more and more difficult and her husband became extremely abusive, she was submissive and accepting (55) until she was badly beaten that could obviously be seen from her deteriorating body. If eventually she fought back harshly—making her husband promise to stop what he did to the family and to move forward to betterment in town with them under a pointing gun (95-97)—her sufferings had to be beyond her capacity to endure. In her forgiveness then, she tried hard to control her husband, who when seeing a chance still beat her and the children, but she did it only with soft words (117).

The aftermath of Brownfield’s abuse to his wife was more chilling than that of Grange’s abuse to his first wife. While Grange indirectly “killed” his wife, Brownfield used his own hands to brutally murder his wife in front of their children. Brownfield’s specific condition has forced him and Mem to “share” responsibilities for the more terrifying consequence. It is Brownfield’s insistence to defend his spoilt dignity that is responsible for the horrifying consequence. Even when he has been given an opportunity to better his family’s life in town, his spoilt dignity prevents him from taking it. However, it is Mem’s forgiveness that provides Brownfield a chance to insist on making every attempt to regain his denied manhood. Alice Walker analyzes, “[Mem’s] weakness was forgiveness, a stupid belief that kindness could convert the enemy” (162).

What adds to the devastating aftermath is Brownfield’s failure to maintain his desire to fight oppression. Unlike his father who determined to go to the North to escape from the white oppressors, Brownfield did not have faith in leaving the South to seek for a better life. Like his mother Margaret, he did not share many black people’s belief that the North offered more opportunities to
better life (59). At the end, Brownfield is described as “a human being who is completely destroyed” (225) by his strong attachment to the poor rural Southern life. Since he did not maintain his fighting spirit against oppression, he got himself so destroyed by racism, poverty, ignorance, and violence that he became a very mean man who never felt regret and intended to right his wrong deeds after killing his own wife.

On the contrary, Grange who managed to maintain his desire to escape from the white oppressors was able to learn his lessons from his previous two lives. Grange was able to realize from his experience that black people had to first learn to value themselves before demanded respect from whites. In his third life, Grange decided to go back to the South because his experience taught him that it was more important to keep a fighting spirit against oppression within oneself than trying to escape from it by running away to the North. Since he learned that he could not use violence to fight oppression and that he could not fight alone, Grange decided to stay away from the white oppressors in order not to be dependent on them. With the help of Josie’s money—at that time had been his second wife, he paid off his debt and bought his new family a house. What was more important, in his regret, Grange intended to redeem his sins by trying to break the cycle of abuse that overwhelmed his own and his son’s lives. In order to do this, Grange intended to prepare his granddaughter Ruth for the white world by teaching her to preserve within her a fighting spirit against oppression. In fighting oppression, however, he passed down to Ruth the lesson he had already learned that they did not need violence. Thus, Ruth was ready to “try to change crackers” by the time the Civil Rights workers invaded Southern Georgia (233). Grange’s realization echoes Alice Walker’s consistency in reminding her community to avoid violence in fighting oppression.

Still, the ending of Grange and Brownfield’s life story is tragic since having learned nothing from his experience, Brownfield was still occupied by his stubborn intention to maintain masculinity through violence. He determined to get his daughters back because he still believed that “having his family was a man’s prerogative” (221). After some failed attempts to take his youngest daughter Ruth away from Grange—including making a plot with Josie,
Brownfield planned to use a court order to force Grange to give up Ruth. Having realized that his son had been completely destroyed as a human being, Grange felt certain that he could save Ruth’s future from her own father only by killing him. And after making sure that Ruth was materially secured, Grange chose to be shot to death by the police to pay his price for killing Brownfield. In the end, both Grange and Brownfield broke the cycle of their depressive and abusive life, but they did it in a tragic way because of the violence they used. Once again, the tragic ending underlines Walker’s consistent reminder to avoid violence in solving black community’s problems.

III. CONCLUSION

To conclude, in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, Alice Walker has given an eloquent and insightful exploration of the cause and damaging effects of domestic violence. Walker identifies that the idea of male domination over women that is being adopted by many black men in male dominated American society has been responsible as the cause of domestic violence. When racial discrimination prevented family black men like Grange and Brownfield to perform the prescribed gender role as family provider and protector, they may experience powerlessness, low-self esteem, feelings of insecurity, and ineffectiveness. These feelings encourage them to turn to their wives and children to restore their denied manhood. They may feel the need to demand their partners and family members to treat them like a man and show them respect. Any challenge, any question from their partner can be interpreted as yet another attempt to chip away at their already insecure and fragile sense of self.

Walker’s further exploration of the devastating effects of domestic violence has confirmed the need of her people to maintain the spirit to fight oppression. By maintaining the spirit, at least, black men do not need to be like Brownfield Copeland who is completely destroyed by racial discrimination that make him trapped in the cycle of depressive and abusive life. Grange Copeland’s lesson to his granddaughter Ruth in his third life is Walker’s further encouragement to her people to avoid violence in solving the racial problem of black people. The tragic ending of Grange and Brownfield’s life story is
affirmative to the fact that violence only results in further violence and ends up in destruction and gets them nowhere near a better condition.

Indeed *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* is an “apprentice novel” with patriarchal plot and feminist perspective; it is still “a novel in which men take center stage, with women characters in a subordinate role.” Despite the claim that she is a feminist black writer, Walker does not go deeper into the minds of her female characters who greatly suffer from violence and abuse inflicted by her male characters. However, this “failing” is eventually able to emphasize the disturbing fact that many abused and battered women (and children) never have courage to articulate their sufferings, let alone leaving the abusive relationships. Walker does not give a chance to her female characters to survive the abusive relationships also. Again it is precisely this “flaw” that eloquently underlines the chilling truth how black women and children have become the most victimized members of black community engaged in abusive relationships. Thus, through her women characters’ tragic ending, Walker emphasizes the need for her people not to be badly beaten and completely destroyed by racism in American society and to keep the fighting spirit to end oppression, and in fighting oppression Walker convinces her people to avoid violence because in the end violence brings only destruction.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


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