

Chain of Resistance in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*

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Abstract

Black women in America have been fighting not only against white patriarchy and white women's racism but also against sexism within their own race. They have been victims of triple repression for being black on skin color, female in sex and economically underprivileged in patriarchal society. Being a black woman is totally different and harder than being just a white woman or a black man. They are bound with racial as well as cultural taboos and the interracial gender barriers. They are victimized not only by white male and female but also by their own men as slaves of slaves. They have been marginalized for being black and female. However, they fight against racial and patriarchal repressions with limited means especially with silence as a submissive woman but sometimes as a rebellious woman. They challenge the male-centered discourse to reclaim their lost identity of womanhood. The feminine gender norms like submissiveness, modesty, passivity disrupt and cease to disrupt according to situation and type of suppression upon them. They do not remain always silent recipients of violence and suppression but struggle with their womanist self to rebuild their selfhood. They create a discourse out of silence to explore subjectivity and start a journey from self-abnegation to self-recognition. While resisting the repressions, black women undergo inner development and maturation and transform themselves from their old narrow self to new open self. Their lives of the past are interconnected with present and construct their future. So black women are not always suspended victims of repressions but are capable to create a space for new generation to claim female identity and selfhood in the society.

Keywords: silence, abuse, repression, resistance, suspended, stubborn, patriarchal revolutionary, liberated, self-abnegation, womanist.

Introduction

African American women authors have become dominant force in creating and contributing to American Literature. They broke their silence and start giving voice to the infinite complexities of African American women's lives. Alice Walker is one of them. Walker in her novels closely looks at the black women who are discriminated, humiliated and sexually abused in racist and sexist society of America. She inspects the stratagem that black women drive to resist these geometric repressions in the racist society and patriarchal black community. Her works speak strongly of the experiences of black women and thematically transcend both race and gender. As a provocative writer, she writes about blacks in particular, but all humanity in general.

Walker emphasizes the fact that black women are not always suspended victims of repressions but are capable of resisting them. Her black female characters come up against the obstructions of different kinds created by patriarchal society in the name of gender, culture, ritual, politics, and tradition. She picks up her female characters to represent different levels

of consciousness and interest of black women. Her women strive to define their identity and selfhood. Her first novel *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* corresponds to the consciousness level of three generations, which seems to be different in each generation. It examines the African American women's experience in a broad psychological, moral, and sexual context. Walker's complex vision of the South, in the novel, can be seen in the development of her female characters: Margaret, Mem and Ruth. These female characters cover three generations of African American women and show how black women have been resisting repression with the growth of their consciousness. Walker shows the chain of resistance that differs in type and kind according to generation. Being one of the powerful female voices of African American women writers, Walker raises the issues of triple repression on black women who are not only black but also female and economically underprivileged.

Passive Recipient of Repression

Alice Walker, in her novels, deals with the theme of repression and resistance and shows how black women resist the repression imposed by both whites and black male. In her novel *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, Walker presents African American women of first generation as submissive, passive and silent recipient of racial, sexual and patriarchal repressions. Margaret represents this generation. Grange Copeland, Margaret's husband, is a black sharecropper who has been enslaved and dehumanized by poverty and debt. He has an extramarital affair with a woman named Josie, a prostitute and sexually liberated woman. Margaret is also frequently seduced by her white landowner. Grange knows it but can do nothing stop his white master from making sexual assault upon his own wife. Needless to say, he is under terror of whites' domination.

In fact, black women have to fight off the sexual advances of white slave owners because black men are relatively powerless to protest the sexual atrocity of white men upon their own women. Lerner Gerda states, "black woman was deprived of a strong black man on whom she could rely for protection" (xxiii). On the other hand, white man has an easy sexual access to black women because for her white master, "she [black woman] was nothing more than a laborer and breeder" (Blea 108). So, Margaret would easily accept sexual advances of her white master. In relation to such sexual exploitation of black women, Bell Hooks in *Ain't I a Woman*, writes:

The use of the word prostitution to describe mass sexual exploitation of enslaved black women by white men not only deflected attention away from the prevalence of forced sexual assault, it lent further credibility to the myth that black females were inherently wanton and therefore responsible for rape. (34)

Rape is also a racially significant concept and a common repressive practice of white dominated society of America. White men used the rape on black women to further emasculate black men. Like Grange, "most black male slaves stood quietly by as white masters sexually assaulted and brutalized black women and were not compelled to act as protectors" (Hook 35). Grange feels frustration being unable to save his wife from white man's sexual assault. Margaret commits suicide poisoning herself and her illegitimate baby.

Margaret, Brownfield's mother and Grange's wife, is blanketed with racial and patriarchal repressions. She can be placed in Washington's categorization of "suspended women" (40). She is seen in the novel almost exclusively through the eyes of her son Brownfield. She is the only female character who suffers throughout her life as a victim. Her oppressive situation is revealed early in the novel when she surrenders to her husband during family disputes. Brownfield describes her as always submissive and hard working woman:

His mother agreed with his father whenever possible. And though he was only ten, he [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 submission to his father. . . . She worked all day pulling baits for ready money. Her legs were always clean when she left home and always coated with mud and slime of baits when she came back. (5-6) Margaret is helplessly submissive to her husband Grange Copeland who is a rather tough and introversive man with reserved nature. He mostly remains silent and his silence threatens his son and wife as he looks as if he was a nonliving thing. His presence creates a cold atmosphere at his home and produces a sense of fear and uneasiness to his family members:

His father never looked at him [Brownfield] or acknowledged him in any way, except to lift his sack of cotton to the back of the truck when it arrived. Brownfield was afraid of his father's silence . . . it was as if his father became a stone or a robot. (8) Brownfield and Margaret are afraid of his silence and feel that he has been toughened like a stone or a robot devoid of human sensitivity and feelings. In fact, it is racial oppression that has blocked Grange's voice. It has made him feel that he is not a human being but just a machine for physical labour. He is in so much racial oppression that his selfhood and identity disappear at the presence of his white master Mr Shipley. Brownfield describes, "His father said nothing. . . . his [Mr. Shipley] presence alone, turn his father into something that might as well have been a pebble or a post or a piece of dirt" (9). Grange feels nervous as he sees his white master and thinks himself insignificant thing like pebble or piece of dirt. His white master needs to say nothing to him but his presence is enough to turn his human persona into something nonhuman item like a pebble, a post or a piece of dirt. Grange can never feel his own selfhood in the white dominated society. So he tries to have the sense of manhood at his home by dominating his wife. JoAnne Cornwell reinforces Grange's domestic violence as an attempt of controlling his existence. He remarks, "Hopelessly indebted to his employer (master), Grange resorts to brutalizing his family as the only means he has of exercising control over his existence" (103). Grange treats his wife at his home as his white master treats him in the society. He forces physical and psychological control over his wife, Margaret at home.

Grange undermines Margaret's self identity and selfhood. He takes her as an item that he can use or sell at anytime for his personal benefit. Brownfield thinks, his father may sell his mother at any time because a woman is just an object to be sold and bought by male. Grange gets angry to his wife when he found her simply speaking to other men. Brownfield thinks: His father's silence was part of the reason his mother was always submissive to him

and why his father was jealous of her and angry if she spoke, just “how’re you?” to other men. May be he had tried to sell her and she wouldn’t be sold- which could be why they were still poor and in debt . . . Maybe his mother was as scared of Grange as he was, terrified by Grange’s tense composure. Perhaps she was afraid he would sell her anyway, whether she wanted to be sold or not. (11)

Grange’s silence has been caused by racial repression and it becomes a big threat to his family members. It can break at any time at home in form of physical assault upon his wife. As the racial oppression makes Grange speechless, he starts drinking alcohol to make a search of his voice. As he gets drunk, he produces terrible voice and becomes violent not in the society with white men but at home with his family members. It often invites a terrible domestic violence: “Late Saturday night 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).

Grange, as a male of patriarchal society, intends to exert his muscular power upon his wife to prove his manhood. So he often makes physical assault upon his wife. Racial oppression has badly affected Grange’s psychological and physical strength as he looks older than his age in body and gloomy in his face: “He was thirty five but seemed much older. His face and eyes had a dispassionate vacancy and sadness as if a great fire had been extinguished within him and was just missed” (12). This fire of his hidden potentiality has been extinguished by racial oppression; however, it often seeks to burn in domestic violence at home.

Margaret is submissive not only to her husband but also to her white master. Yet, she resists repression through the limited means that are available to her. Mostly she applies silence as a means for resistance. Trinh Minh-ha, in relation to women’s silence, states, “silence as a will not to say or a will to unsay and as a language of its own” (73-74). Sometimes, Margaret fights with Grange to resist the repression. She reports her son Brownfield: “your daddy and me had another fight . . . we had us a rip-rowing, knock-down, drag-out fight” (16). She resists his verbal attack with her silence but as he comes on violence, she often makes counter attack to him as a gallant warrior. It is a move from silent discourse to expressive mode of resistance. She applies both passive and active means of resistance against repression as the situation demands. She has to deal not only with oppression and poverty but also with Grange’s drunkenness, abuse, and infidelity.

Brownfield notices her changing identity and comments: “one day she was as he had always known her; kind, submissive, smelling faintly of milk; and the next day she was a wild woman looking for frivolous things, her heart’s good times, in the transient embraces of strangers” (20). This description about Margaret also signals that Margaret uses both passive and active tools of resistance to deal with the repression though she eventually has to embrace death. Tired of her hard physical labor and the neglects of her husband, Margaret becomes a wild woman looking for frivolous things. Margaret responds Grange’s infidelity, drunkenness and rude behaviour with her infidelity by having sexual relation with her white

master. This illegitimate relation results in giving birth to a child out of wedlock. It is an active resistance against repression.

Obviously, Margaret resists the repression in her own way either by being submissive and loyal to her husband and white master, sometimes being wild and sometimes sinking in alcoholism and sexual promiscuity. Margaret has been victimized by different types of oppressions due to the fact that she is black, she is female and she is economically underprivileged. Grange abuses her and neglects his son Brownfield because he feels himself less than a man in land where his entire life is indebted to the white boss. He also feels guilty because he can neither protect his wife from the white hairy arms of Mr. Shipley nor make it possible for a better life to his son. Due to lack of property and other means, Margaret cannot wrestle against her husband's brutal repression to get him on the right track. Nor is she capable of claiming her identity to rebuild her family. This leads her into a state of depression and "depression always gave away to fighting, as if fighting preserved some part of the feeling of being alive" (20). Her loyal and submissive life has taken a turn to fighting, drinking and adultery as a response to the repressions upon her. Ann Folwell Stanford writes, "[Grange] epitomizes both victim and victimizer as he becomes increasingly cruel to his wife, Margaret, eventually deserting her, prompting her to kill herself" (116). When her husband abandons his family for the North, Margaret poisons herself and her illegitimate baby.

Margaret's suicide is the end of her resistance to repression and ironically it implies the end of repression too from the other end. She is suspended victim of patriarchal and racial repressions. However, she resists it passively mostly with her feminine qualities like silence, submissiveness and sacrifice. She often creates a discourse out of silence to resist repression and seems to be a passive recipient of repression

Revolutionary Victim of Repression

Walker's black female characters are not always passive recipient and suspended victims of repression. They also go on resisting repressions in their own ways according to situation and types of repression. Black women of second generation in the novel are found rather revolutionary and conscious of their existence and individuality. They also have to survive confronting the racial and patriarchal repressions. However, they make a slight departure from the women of first generation. They move to the search of their individuality and identity though patriarchal society victimizes them.

Mem represents the second generation of African American women. She is a school teacher whereas her husband Brownfield is an illiterate man. Unlike other African American female characters, she is an educated black woman. Her education itself becomes a challenge to the dominant ideology of her patriarchal society. Her education and "proper walk" (44) become a threat to the socio-cultural pattern of racist and patriarchal ideologies. Her academic background gives a psychological deterrence to her husband, Brownfield. Her profession and academic background makes him feel internally inferior to her. Externally, he feels proud of being male and tries to hide his feeling of academic inferiority. Only for being male, he exerts repression on his wife and tries to pull down her to his level:

His crushed pride, his battered ego, made him drag Mem away from school teaching. Her knowledge reflected badly on a husband who could scarcely read and write. It was his great ignorance that sent her into white homes as a domestic, his need to bring her down to his level! (55) Brownfield begins to doubt her character and “accuses Mem of being unfaithful to him, of being used by white men, his oppressors” (54). Mem instantly refuses to accept such false charges. But he tries to “treat her like nigger and a whore which he knew she was not” (54). Ironically he himself being a Negro hates his wife and treats her like nigger.

Mem, initially resists all his charges and mistreatment with her voice of silence as Trinh Minh-ha, in *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Post-Coloniality and Feminism* states, “Silence as a refusal to partake in the story does sometimes provide us with a means to gain a hearing. It is voice, a mode of uttering, and a response in its own right” (83). Mem turns her deaf ear to his charges and mistreatment but resists them with silence as a refusal to partake in the story. She forgives all his abusive treatment: “Her weakness was forgiveness, a stupid belief that kindness can convert the enemy” (162). So, Brownfield goes on taking advantage of her nobility and decency.

Brownfield gets his manhood lost in the white dominated society and feels frustration. He uses Mem as medium to releases his frustration through violence. Amanda Davis reinforces it, “Mem’s body literally becomes the text onto which Brownfield can write his frustration and declare his manhood” (38). He frequently makes brutal attacks on her and tries to see his manhood in violence: “Brownfield beats 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” (55). Brownfield discharges his frustration through violence on his wife Mem. Seema Murugan rightly states, “They [black men] vent their frustration through inflicting violence on their women . . . because they dare not take them out on white person of either gender” (163). John Archer and Barbara Lloyd also remark “Violence is seen as the masculine way of reacting to the difficulties and frustrations of life” (109). Brownfield reacts to the difficulties of survival in poverty and frustration of life and searches his manhood through domestic violence. Brownfield regards his muscular power as a reward for being male. Having no genuine potentiality in him, he uses muscular power as a tool to dominate his educated wife.

In the patriarchal society of America, black men who refused to accept the meek position allocated to them were called ‘bad nigga’ or ‘bad men’ and “they used a conscious show of some type of physical force to prove themselves” (Majors and Bilson 33) as masculine. Black men regard physical force as a means to prove manhood and masculinity. Their physical toughness has been equated with manliness in their patriarchal society. Therefore, Brownfield frequently invites domestic violence and exerts physical power upon his wife. Ricky Jones states “it [violence] is now regarded as an important tool in the construction of black male identity and manhood . . . unfortunately, violent physical struggle has come to be regarded as a key ingredient in building this manhood” (7). Brownfield tries to rebuild his manhood by exerting violence on his wife time and again. Every Saturday night, Brownfield gets drunk and attacks her verbally and physically. But Mem forgives him with silence. His

Saturday fight is described as:

Saturday night found Brownfield, as usual, liberally prepared for his weekly fight with Mem. He stumbled home full of whiskey, cursing at the top of his voice. Mem lay with her face to the wall pretending to be asleep. "You think you better than me," he cried. "Don't you" DON'T YOU! You ugly pig!" . . . You wake up and look at me when I talk to you! . . . You and them Goddam sad-looking high and mighty brats of yours, that you done turned against me!" he said . . . Mem said nothing, lay so silent it was as if she were not breathing or thinking or even being, but her tired eyes rested directly on him with the tense heated waiting that many years of Saturday-night beatings had brought. "I'm sick and tired of this mess," she said, rising abruptly, waiting for the first blow to head or side or breasts. . . . "I'm sick of you". No sooner had the words fallen out in a little explosive heap than Brownfield's big elephant-hide fist hit her square in the mouth. (90)

The above extract shows Brownfield's physical abuse as the means of repression. It also shows the transition of Mem's resistance from non verbal to verbal mode as an indication that it is likely to be explosive in the future. Brownfield takes Mem's resistance through forgiveness as her weakness. As he doubles up the violence on her, Mem's applies active and stubborn form of resistance. She makes a move from silence to speech and reclaims her identity. In response to Brownfield's decision to take family to another sharecropping cabin, Mem retorts him: "I ain't" Mem said. "I ain't and these children ain't." She stiffened her thin tough neck for his blow" (82). As a decision maker man of the family in male dominated society, Brownfield orders Mem not to move her lips against his decision and says, "It's all settled . . . We going to move over to Mr. J. L.'s come next Monday and . . . I don't want any lip from you!"(83). But Mem dosobeys his command opening her lips and challenges him with womanist consciousness and says, "I already told you . . . you ain't dragging me and these children through no more pigpens. We have put up with mud long enough . . . Me and these children got to right to live in a house where it don't rain and there's no holes in the floor" (83-84). Mem makes a move to expressive mode from silence and rejects to move with him to live at white man's sharecropping cabin. She further retorts, "You can beat me to death and I still aint going to say I'm going with you" (91). Then Brownfield gets furious and holding a knife warns her "you say one more word, just one more little goddam peep and I'll cut your goddam throat!" (91). He gives her a resounding kick in the side of her head. It makes her see "a number of blurred pale stars, nothing else" (91). Now Mem moves from verbal mode of resistance to retaliation. She holds a shotgun and points at him as a response to his perpetual repression on her. The gap in communication and understanding to each other between husband and wife creates a horrible situation. Monica Blumenthal rightly points out, "the lack of understanding, communication, trust and respect between people causes individual violence" (21). Lack of love, understanding and communication are naturally the most important reasons for the violence.

As Mem points her gun at Brownfield, he gets terrified. Mem puts a good control over her gun barrel and points at between his thighs. Then she orders him not to move a inch here and there from his place: "Don't you move a inch . . . you move just a teeny weeny little bit more

Mr. Brownfield, and you ain't going to have nary a ball left to play catch with" (92-93). Now, she aims the shotgun at his testicles and threatens to blow away his manhood if he refuses to reform. Brownfield gets nervous with terror and begins to moan in prayer, "Oh Lawd" (93). Mem pokes him with her gun and says, "I don't want you laying up here with me! Go on, git down there!" (93). Pointing gun at his forehead, Mem threatens: "I'm going to blow your goddam brains out" and "I'm going to cut your goddam tongue" (96). She asks him to realize what she sacrificed and did for his happiness and to make him feel his manhood. Brownfield trembles with fear in deep convulsive shudders as "tears and blood and vomit ran together down his shaking legs" (95). Now Brownfield realizes his misdeeds and confesses his mistakes. Mem proves that women are not always silent recipients of males' repression and violence but they can be more violent than men if need be.

Mem gets victory over her husband and makes him obey her commands. She challenges the male authority. She proves that she is no more a passive recipient of male's oppression as traditionally defined black woman of the patriarchal ideology but a rebellion protesting repression with her own selfhood and identity. She is not a passive victim of repression but a violent freedom fighter capable to defy repression. She sets herself apart from the category of the 'suspended women' owing to her education, speech, skill and courage. She dies fighting for freedom, justice and system. She proves her selfhood and inner power of women that can subdue the ego of manhood. She is revolutionary character fighting for freedom during her life.

Liberated Victim of Repression

Walker's women characters display strength, endurance, and resourcefulness in confronting and overcoming the repressions in their lives. Her female characters of first and second generation in the novel suffer much more from repressions. They resist repressions through passive and active model of resistance. They initially use silence as a means of resisting racial and patriarchal repression. They also apply stubborn method of resistance but ultimately get defeated. However, the black women of second generation are found more daring than of first generation. It is only Ruth from third generation who suffers less than her grandmother Margaret and mother Mem.

Ruth is liberated from being victim of repression. Her mother Mem succeeds in moving the family to a town for a better set up of the family. In the town, Ruth can have living experience of a real house and formal school education. Mem paves a way for Ruth to be liberated from repressions and stand as a role model of black women. She creates a ground for Ruth to maintain her human dignity in a dehumanizing environment of racist and patriarchal society. She is an "exquisite butterfly trapped in an evil honey" (In Search 232) with her "vibrant, creative spirit that a black woman has inherited" (In Search 239). She sets herself as the model for young generation to fight for freedom and resist repressions with courage and patience.

Ruth's perspective is integrated with Grange Copeland, her grandpa, as he comes back from the North and offers her a guardianship. This prominent perspective leads critics

to focus on Ruth as the most important black female character of third generation. Ruth does not have to face the violence and repression unlike her grandmother and mother- Margaret and Mem. She has got guardianship of Grange as her surrogate father who has accumulated different types of experiences of survival by wandering for years in the North. He spends his first life with Margaret and his white masters, second life in North and now third life at his home after coming back from the North. Obviously, Grange has witnessed the life of black women of three generations. He thinks something is missing in the survival of black women in the racist and sexist society. He realizes that survival is one thing but something is missing in the survival: "Survival was not everything. He had survived. But to survive whole is what he wanted for Ruth" (242). He has got transformation in his thoughts, experiences and vision about human life and the world. So it is relatively easy for Ruth to grow up and survive in her home and community under the guardianship of Grange.

As Grange comes back from the North, he finds his son Brownfield, Ruth's father, caught up in the same cycle of despair from which he tried to escape. So he dedicates himself to protecting Ruth from her frustrated father Brownfield and the foulness of the Southern environment where she was born. Ruth also develops a consciousness of Southern life which makes her aware of its strengths and dangers. She knows that the society which she lives in has poisoned her father and mother. This knowledge allows her to imagine a broader world beyond the South. She alone reaps the benefits of Grange's benevolent old age after her mother is murdered and her father goes to prison for the crime. As a result, she is able to create a way out of no way. Like the Biblical Ruth, she finds herself an alien in a strange land, a new space offering fresh possibilities.

Grange and Ruth develop a stronger bond as he shares stories of the past with Ruth to develop her self-consciousness. She listens to him thoughtfully as he shares his experiences of life in racist society. He believes that "hatred for whites will someday unite us" (154). Ruth realizes that her grandpa Grange wants to protect her from his racist and sexist society. She is far from the hurts and violence that her mother and grandmother have endured. She does not have to face the racist and sexist repression as much as her mother and grandmother did. Her years long apprenticeship with Grange teaches her a great deal about the society she live in. "Grange's death" as JoAnne Cornwell states, "signals the end of this apprenticeship and Ruth's entry into a new phase of her life, which goes beyond the story end" (105). In a sense, Ruth is the embodiment of both male and female transcendence.

Margaret and Mem fight against repression in their own ways but cannot survive wholly and successfully. Ruth is lucky enough for getting her grandfather's support for survival. She gets a big space set by her predecessor to resist repression of racist and sexist society. She represents third generation liberated from being victim of racist, sexist and patriarchal society. However, Ruth's presence cannot erase the history of the black women of first and second generation.

Conclusion

Walker, in her novel, shows how black women resist the repression imposed by both

whites and black male. She finds the black women literarily forced to offer themselves to their husbands in a sexual subordination. She perceives the situation as not only that of banality of evil or racial problem, but also as a conspiracy by the ideological structure of patriarchal society. It is a combination of both political and sexual oppression by the whites and both white and non-white men. Though doubly marginalized as being black and female, black women question the mainstream society and also challenge it.

Female characters in the novel, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, represent three generations of black women resisting repressions. Black women of first generation resist repression through silence as passive recipients. As a suspended victim, Margaret employs mostly the model of passive resistance against the repression. Second generation sets an example of revolutionary group to resist repression as freedom fighter. This generation makes significant attempts to reclaim identity and rebuild the family and community. Mem from second generation, never surrenders to patriarchal power. She dies fighting for freedom, justice and system. Initially, she uses the tool of passive resistance but later on, she uses both the tool of active and stubborn resistance against repression and succeeds to overpower it. Both Margaret and Mem from first and second generation have challenged the sexist and racist society in their own ways. Predecessors have paved a way to Ruth from new generation to win her selfhood and identity in the society. Ruth stand on the foundation and moves on the path of liberation paved by her predecessors. After all, American African women challenge the male-centered discourse and reclaim their lost identity of womanhood. They create a discourse out of silence to explore subjectivity and start a journey from self- abnegation to self- recognition. They display variant stages of resistance evolving from generation to generation.

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