

Racial Oppression and Resilience in Alice Walker's Novel *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*

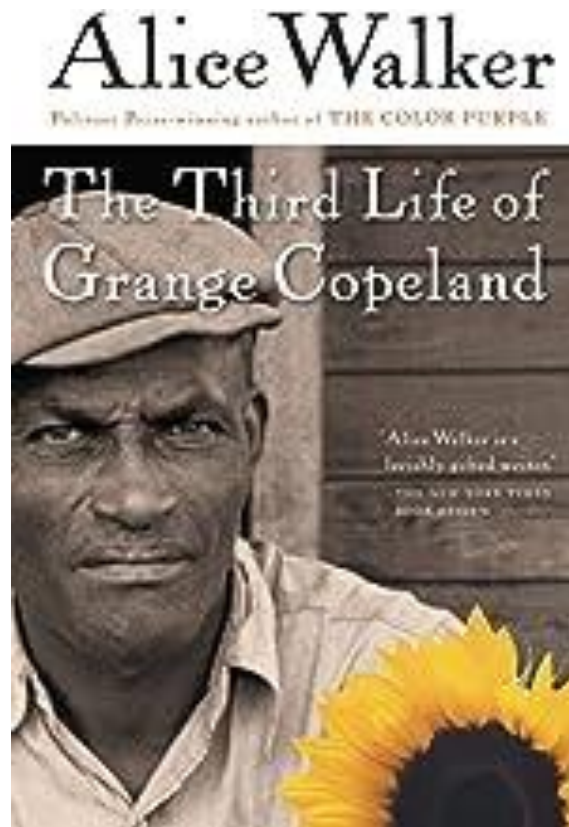
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Abstract

The present article examines Alice Walker's 1970 novel, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* which probes the enduring and distressing repercussions of racial oppression faced by African Americans in the early 20th-century southern United States. Spanning three generations of the Copeland family, the narrative offers a poignant exploration of systemic racism's profound impact on individuals, families, and communities. Set against the backdrop of the sharecropping system, a prevalent form of agricultural labour, the novel unveils a cycle of poverty and exploitation that ensnares African American families. The Copeland's experiences illuminate the oppressive nature of sharecropping, where white landowners wield dominion over labourers, ensnaring them in cycles of debt and destitution.

A central theme reveals the insidious reach of racial discrimination, overt and covert, penetrating every facet of African American life. The characters grapple with internalized racism, inherited from generations of oppression, resulting in self-esteem and relationship repercussions. Walker's work further delves into the pursuit of identity and self-discovery within a hostile milieu. Characters yearn for freedom and a brighter future, yet racial prejudice stifles their aspirations and possibilities. Despite their determination, they encounter barriers and constrained prospects due to their skin colour. *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* lays bare the intergenerational trauma borne from racial oppression and the complex web of racism entrenched in society. Through vivid storytelling and compelling characters, the novel both underscores the enduring fight against racial bias and celebrates the unwavering spirit of those who persevere amidst adversity.

Keywords: Alice Walker, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, African Americans, Sharecropping, Racial discrimination, Economic struggles, Oppression.

African American Women Writers

African American women writers have made significant contributions to American literature and have played a crucial role in shaping the cultural and literary landscape of the United States. Throughout history, they have used their unique voices to explore themes of race, gender, identity, and social injustice, creating powerful narratives that have resonated with readers of diverse backgrounds.

The legacy of African American women writers can be traced back to the early 19th century when women like Phillis Wheatley, Alice Walker and Harriet E. Wilson challenged societal norms by publishing their works and sharing their perspectives. However, it was during the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s and 1930s that African American women writers

gained more prominence and recognition for their literary achievements. The Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s provided a fertile ground for writers like Maya Angelou, Alice Walker, and Toni Morrison to rise to prominence. Their works not only explored racial and gender issues but also delved into universal themes of love, resilience, and the human experience.

One of the central themes that run through the works of these writers is the exploration of intersectionality the interconnectedness of race, gender, class, and other aspects of identity. Their stories are a powerful testament to the complex and diverse experiences of African American women and highlight the on-going struggles for equality and representation. African American women writers have played an essential role in American literature by offering unique perspectives on race, gender, and identity. Through their literary contributions, they have challenged societal norms, shed light on the African American experience, and enriched the world of literature with their powerful narratives. Their works continue to inspire, educate, and create important dialogues about the complexities of the human condition.

Alice Walker was the youngest of eight children in a family of sharecroppers. Despite the challenges of growing up in a racially segregated and impoverished environment in the American South, she developed a love for reading and writing from an early age. Walker faced racial discrimination and struggled with an injury that left her blind in one eye, but her determination and passion for education led her to excel academically. Walker attended Spelman College in Atlanta on a scholarship and later transferred to Sarah Lawrence College in New York, where she continued to pursue her interest in writing. She became involved in civil rights activism and was deeply influenced by the works of African American writers and feminist thinkers.

Racial Oppression

"A black man ain't got no rights in this world." - *Grange Copeland*.

This novel, published in 1970, is one of Alice Walker's early works and is an important piece of African American literature. It deals with various themes, including racial oppression, poverty, and the search for identity. Racial oppression is a prominent theme throughout the novel, as it explores the lives of African Americans during the early 20th century in the southern United States. The story follows three generations of the Copeland family, starting with Grange Copeland, a sharecropper who escapes from the South to the

North to seek a better life. However, even in the North, the family faces racial discrimination and economic struggles.

"No nigger can treat a white woman like this and get away with it." - White Sheriff.

One of the ways racial oppressions is depicted in the novel is through the sharecropping system, which was a form of agricultural labour that effectively trapped many African Americans in a cycle of poverty and debt. The sharecroppers were often exploited by white landowners, who controlled the means of production and took advantage of the labourers' vulnerable positions. The characters in the novel also grapple with internalized racism, as they have been conditioned to believe in their inferiority due to the pervasive racism in society. This internalized racism affects their self-esteem and relationships with one another, contributing to a cycle of self-destructive behaviour.

Moreover, the novel explores how systemic racism affects the characters' opportunities and chances for a better life. Despite their aspirations and hard work, the Copeland family members encounter various obstacles and limitations purely because of their race. This theme is particularly evident in the experiences of the second and third generations of the Copeland family. Throughout *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* Alice Walker addresses the complex and lasting impact of racial oppression on individuals, families, and communities. By portraying the struggles and resilience of the Copeland family, the novel highlights the harsh realities faced by African Americans during a time when racial segregation and discrimination were deeply entrenched in American society.

Consequences of Racial Oppression

In Alice Walker's *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* racial oppression has profound and far-reaching consequences on the lives of the characters and the larger African American community depicted in the novel. The consequences of racial oppression are felt across generations and impact various aspects of life, including personal identity, family dynamics, socioeconomic status, and mental well-being. Some of the key consequences of racial oppression in the novel include:

Economic Struggles: Racial oppression, particularly in the form of the sharecropping system, traps African American families in cycles of poverty and debt. The Copeland family faces constant economic hardships, with limited opportunities for advancement or escape from their dire circumstances.

Internalized Racism: Generations of racial discrimination have led to internalized racism among the characters. They struggle with feelings of self-doubt and worthlessness, believing the negative stereotypes perpetuated by society about their racial identity.

Breakdown of Family Bonds: The weight of racial oppression often strains familial relationships. Grange Copeland's strained relationship with his son Brownfield is influenced by a legacy of oppression and limited emotional connection, resulting in family fragmentation.

Mental and Emotional Trauma: The characters experience profound mental and emotional trauma as a result of racial oppression. The constant struggle for survival and the pervasive discrimination takes a toll on their mental well-being, leading to despair and hopelessness.

Limited Opportunities: Racial oppression restricts access to education, employment, and social mobility. The Copeland family members encounter barriers in pursuing their dreams and aspirations, hindering their chances of a better life.

Loss of Identity: Racial oppression erodes a sense of cultural identity and pride. The characters grapple with their place in society, struggling to define themselves beyond the oppressive narratives imposed upon them.

Social Alienation: The African American characters in the novel face social alienation and isolation due to racial segregation and discrimination. They are marginalized and excluded from the broader community, exacerbating feelings of disempowerment.

Self-Destructive Behaviour: The internalized pain and frustration resulting from racial oppression lead some characters, such as Brownfield, to engage in self-destructive behaviour, perpetuating a cycle of suffering.

Intergenerational Impact: Racial oppression's effects are passed down through generations, creating a legacy of trauma and struggle that continues to shape the lives of the characters' descendants.

Resistance and Resilience: Despite the overwhelming consequences of racial oppression, the characters also exhibit resilience and resistance. They strive to reclaim their agency and dignity, attempting to break free from the chains of oppression.

The Third Life of Grange Copeland vividly portrays the enduring consequences of racial oppression on individuals and families.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Walker masterfully confronts the harsh realities of racial oppression, weaving a compelling narrative that sheds light on the enduring struggles faced by African Americans in the early 20th century. The novel's exploration of the consequences of racial oppression leaves a lasting impact, providing readers with a profound understanding of the deeply entrenched societal issues of that era.

Throughout the story, the pernicious effects of racial oppression are evident in the lives of the characters. The sharecropping system serves as a stark representation of economic exploitation, as African American families like the Copelands are trapped in a cycle of poverty and desperation, with little hope for escape. Moreover, the characters grapple with the internalized racism ingrained through generations, leading to a profound sense of self-doubt and diminished self-worth. The consequences of racial oppression reverberate through family dynamics, as strained relationships and emotional distance are observed within the Copeland family. The novel illuminates the toll that systemic racism takes on mental and emotional well-being, resulting in despair and hopelessness for many characters. Alice Walker also highlights the limited opportunities available to African Americans due to racial discrimination. Despite their aspirations, the characters face barriers to education, employment, and social mobility, hindering their pursuit of a better life.

Nevertheless, amidst the darkness of racial oppression, the novel also reveals glimmers of hope and resilience. The characters' resistance to their circumstances showcases their strength and determination to overcome adversity. Walker emphasizes the importance of reclaiming one's identity and cultural pride in the face of dehumanizing treatment. The novel serves as a powerful exploration of the complex web of social and psychological impacts caused by systemic racism, while also highlighting the strength and determination of those who strive for a better life in the face of adversity.

The Third Life of Grange Copeland is a poignant and powerful examination of racial oppression, skilfully crafted by Alice Walker. By exploring its consequences on personal, familial, and societal levels, the novel serves as a stark reminder of the enduring legacy of systemic racism. It calls upon readers to confront the past, reflect on the present, and actively work towards a more just and equitable future for all individuals, regardless of their race or

ethnicity. The novel's timeless themes resonate far beyond its pages, making it an important and enduring contribution to the on-going dialogue on racial oppression and social justice.

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