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Third Life -

Alice Walker's Exposé of the Tragic World of the Sharecroppers

Gulab Chillar, Ph.D.

Aftermath of the Abolition of Slavery

Alice Walker is usually seen as a writer focused more with the feminist concerns of the black woman. But the range of her fiction is very wide and goes far beyond the feminist tone. Her socio-political concerns are as strong as her concern for women. The political and economic struggle of her people for freedom from slavery and their sufferings caused by the exploitation and oppression after freedom, constitute an important part of the picture of life on her fictional canvas.

The end of the Civil War had brought about striking changes in the character of the American society. The North emerged at the forefront of the process of recasting the national identity. In spite of the people it had lost, the North had been largely secure from the ravages of the war. The industrial and agricultural sector had recorded significant growth during the civil war. The South on the other hand was devastated by the war that depended almost exclusively on slave labour. It found itself without farmhands after the emancipation of the blacks from their owners. Many of the blacks celebrated the destruction of the slave system by abandoning farms and plantations, and their newfound freedom by traveling across the South in search of loved ones they had been separated from. The blacks as a community were soon confronted with the crisis of what to do next.

It became the urgent need of the time to get people back to work, which was no simple task in a region where brutal warfare had forcibly emancipated the slaves, its primary labour force prior to the Civil War. Their absence from the farms greatly hampered efforts at economic

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recovery. They were promised the land necessary to sustain an independent existence, but white owners refused to give up. The greatest dilemma in the post-war South was the existence of the blacks who were free but still without the tools necessary to ensure economic independence.

Subordination under Share-cropping – Economic Bondage

A solution to the South's crisis seemed to emerge in the form of sharecropping. The blacks were drawn into schemes where they cultivated a piece of land owned by whites for a share of the profit from the crops. Under the system there was no provision for granting any right of ownership on the land they worked upon. They would get the seeds, food and equipment from the store of the white owners, which allowed them to run a tab throughout the year and to settle up once the crops, usually cotton, were gathered. When accounting time came, the black farmer was always a few dollars short of what he owed the landowner. So he invariably began the New Year with a deficit. As that deficit grew he found himself enmeshed deeper and deeper into ever growing debt leading to economic bondage. The hard back breaking work not only physically destroyed but also mentally blighted the farmers and their families who could seldom envision escape for themselves or for their children; their lives were endless tales of untold miseries. Thus sharecropping curiously came to redefine "the method of land lease that would eventually become a new form of slavery" (Harris:1021).

Share-cropping – a Major Literary Theme

Sharecropping has been used as a theme in literature dealing especially with the South in the late nineteenth century Charles W. Chestnutt's *The Wife of His Youth and other Stories of the Color Line* (1900) documents lease system that imprisoned black men in the same manner as sharecropping. Jailed on fraudulent charges of vagrancy, these men would in turn be hired out as cheap labour to local whites. "This new prison environment was practically inescapable" of the misery of the "sharecroppers who were unable to escape their plight"(Harris:1021). Brow's collection of poems *Southern Road* is a record of the lives of rural blacks tied to unyielding soil and uncompromising land owners.

Most blacks found themselves helpless in the face of racist oppression and were unable to cope with it in any way other than by numbing themselves to pain and suffering. They just became accustomed to lacerations of slavery and racial discrimination. Their powerlessness against the white bosses destroyed their courage and strength and turned them into excessively submissive creatures. Though there are numerous examples of the crippling effects of resultant subjugation, the response of plantation workers at Shipley's farm in the novel *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* stands out as an outstanding example. All of these workers through their behaviour and attitude reveal the effects of economic oppression under the racist system. Their grinding poverty is a kind of calamity for these poor, they have to depend for their bare survival upon the mercy of their white bosses who rule the system. They have no choice but to carry out the work under the orders of their bosses without any sense of joy or fulfillment.

A Child of Sharecroppers

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Much of Alice Walker's fiction is informed by her southern background. Born to sharecroppers in Eatonton, Georgia, a rural town where most blacks worked as tenant farmers, she drew upon firsthand knowledge of this practice when she wrote her first novel *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*. Walker knew the problems, pressure and challenges faced by the black community. She recalls vividly in her memoirs how she grew up in the school of miseries and sufferings often threatening her sense of dignity and identity as an individual. She remembers clearly her experience of a life of poverty as a child born in a large family.

Walker narrates the sharecroppers' lack of real life in a greatly subtle and insightful way. "The cotton field too was generally silent" (*TLGC*:8). The silence is an eloquent expression of the painful suppression of life with its hope and joy. It is disturbed only when the grown-ups talked softly, intermittently like the sporadic humming of wasps" (*TLGC*:8). If the silence signifies monotony and emptiness in the life of these workers, the comparison of their sounds with the humming of wasps conveys forcefully the degradation of the status and meaning of their life to that of mere insects in the racist economic system.

Servility

A sense of servility has sunk deep into the black psyche. They cannot conduct themselves with confidence and self-respect in the white dominated community. Therefore feeling of inferiority prevents them while working with Grange on the cotton field even from looking into the eyes of Shipley's truck driver: "...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." (*TLGC*:9)

This void in their life is deep and they do not experience a flicker of joy even at the sight of their own children. Brownfield recalls how Grange, his father, never looked at him or acknowledged him in any way, except to lift his sack of cotton to the back of the truck when it arrived" (*TLGC*:9). This absence of communication is symptomatic of the deeper malaise of a kind of emotional atrophy afflicting the share croppers. They are rendered incapable of normal human feelings and responses, and they go through the process of living only mechanically.

The Story and Character of Grange

The way Grange sinks into an unnaturally bland mask "and becomes like a stone or a robot" (*TLGC*:9) at the sight of Shipley and his truck is a telling illustration of the failure of the sharecroppers to bear the pressures of racist conditions. "A grim stillness" settles on the face of Grange at the sight of his master oppressor making him an object, a cipher"(*TLGC*:9) unable to move except in jerks, if it moves, at all, speaks clearly of a state of complete breakdown of his nerves and his submission to an overwhelming external force of the racial and economic order.

In the first stage of life Grange appears to be a highly self-centered, drunkard, domineering and an adulterous individual. His relationship with his family is a total disaster and he always creates a very tense environment. It keeps the whole family in lurking fear. "Their life followed a kind of cycle that depended almost totally on Grange's moods"(*TLGC*:14). In order to

show his aggressive masculinity he ill-treats his wife and son and reveals himself as a self-centered person seeking his own gratification exploiting others. In this first phase of his life he appears as an abusive drunkard who gets drunk every Saturday night and comes home only to beat his wife. He would come home drunk, threatening to kill his wife and Brownfield, stumbling and shooting off his shot gun"(TLGC: 15).

Grange's abject poverty and miseries lead him to drink and beat his wife. We come to know that initially he is a compulsive womanizer and adulterer. He spends nights with fat Josie, his mistress. His son Brownfield is also aware of this fact. He knew his father was seeing another woman, and had been seeing one, or several, for a long time"(TLGC:22). Grange's infidelity and faithlessness has a tremendous effect on his wife, Margaret, who often fights with him. Once she tells her son: "Oh we had us a rip-rowing, knock-down, drag out fight. With that fat yellow hitch of his calling the punches"(TLGC:21).

This totally negative mentality is the result of Grange's depression which always gave way to fighting, as if fighting preserved some part of the feeling of being alive"(TLGC:21). Finally Grange abandons his family and it makes him the prime architect of his wife and little baby's death.

Oppressive Conditions of Women

Though Walker's fiction is verily the fact of the life of the black community dispossessed of their human rights, dignity and equality in general it vividly creates the oppressive condition of women in particular. The black women had to face a system which sought to perpetuate violence not only to their bodies but also to their minds and souls treating them as no better than chattels. They were deprived of all opportunities--economic, social or cultural. They were disabled in a number of ways and society was largely responsible for their miseries and sufferings. This oppression of the black women and the way some of them faced it by resigning themselves to their situation has been treated with remarkable insight by Walker. Walker's women surrender to their oppressive conditions, lack faith in themselves and, therefore, do nothing to alter their conditions for the better. In the absence of a vision and hope of a different future they tend to bury away their natural impulse to live a human life of dignity and grace.

Margaret

Margaret is doomed to a life of decay and decline. She appears in the novel as a Copeland's wife, sweet and virginal woman. One of her sisters is in the North, and Margaret, too, has been contemplating possibilities of going North and improving the fortunes of her family. This surely suggests that she is conscious of the opportunities of betterment of the lot of her family but she does not leave her husband behind to take this plunge alone. In fact, her fidelity to Grange and her efforts to build a happy life with him reveal her valuable qualities as a woman. She displays remarkable ability to understand Grange's frustrations and inner tensions. As a wife, she tries to mitigate his plight through her caring attention. It is to take out some of the venom of frustration that she didn't do or say anything that could further deepen Grange's crisis" (TLGC:6). Brownfield observes, "She didn't have a thing to say that did not in some way show

her submission to his father"(TLGC:6). He thinks his mother agreed with his father whenever possible"(TLGC:6). Her submission to Grange and her efforts to agree with him clearly indicates not only her endurance and a sense of sacrifice, but also her resolve to create a happy life as far as possible with her husband. She even worked all day pulling baits for ready money, "coming home clean and cook, trying to maintain a home for a husband and son"(TLGC:7). But Margaret has to contend with situations of oppression and debasement not only from without but from within her own family also. Her strength thus proves to be too limited to help her confront the heavy odds in her life with dignity and integrity intact.

By the time Brownfield is fifteen, Margaret has been regularly trying to change her world into something it could never be. She finds the injustice and inhumanities of the sharecropping system too heavy a weight for her to bear. Grange's frustration caused by his failures in the racist and exploitative economic system continues to subvert her attempts to build a happy home. She is emotionally deserted and humiliated by Grange with the flourish of his affairs with Josie. Margaret ultimately runs out of resources of her inner strength. Unable to withstand the pressures of her debasing situation, she feels broken and loses control over her life.

Accustomed to receiving nothing from Grange, who deserts her both emotionally and physically, Margaret seeks escape in the arms of strangers. She thus tries to negate the reality of her painful existence by attempting to realize the dream of love through her "sexual encounters with fellow bait-pullers and church members" (TLGC:27). On weekends, after having struggled to look after her family, she becomes a huntress of soft touches, gentle voices and sex without the arguments over the constant and compelling pressures of everyday life"(TLGC:27). She turns herself a commodity for Shipley, and even his driver Johnny Johnson uses her body for his carnal pleasure. All she gets from this indulgence in sex with a number of men is a temporary feeling of relief from the boredom and pain of her daily life.

Alice Walker and Margaret

Walker's own aversion to Margaret's attitude of escape from the realities of one's condition is evident as she provides the reader an insight into the hollowness of Margaret's life. Her attempts to find answers to her problems in promiscuity fail to give her a sense of fulfillment and strength. On the contrary, Margaret sinks deeper into frustration and depression. A sense of guilt haunts her, and even her desperate efforts of defiance fail to conceal her inner weakness and void. She feels restless and miserable, unable to face her own image of a fallen woman. It is this that leads her ultimately to an act of self-destruction.

Sense of Guilt and Escape in Margaret

Star, Margaret's son born of illegitimate sexual relations, is a constant reminder to her of her guilt, he is two years old but can neither walk nor speak, as if struck by the sins of his mother. Unable to muster up sufficient courage, necessary to overcome this feeling of guilt, Margaret ultimately is driven to commit an act of aggression against herself and her child. She embraces death as the only means of escape. She poisons her son as well as herself and dies as a

pathetic and lonely figure: “She was curled up in a lonely sort of way, away from her child, as if she had spent the last moments on her knees”(TLGC:29).

Margaret's life, characterised by an unremitting process of decay and degeneration, is suggestive of the writer's rejection of the mode of escape. Walker attributes the black community's tendency to escape to easy pleasures a lack of inner strength and self-esteem. An artist of life, she treats escapists like Margaret with understanding and insight, however, but does not present them as persons deserving sympathy or admiration.

Suffering under Extreme Racism

Brownfield's narrative shows how cruelly he is victimized by the extreme racism and poverty of the Georgia backwoods world in which he is born and raised. His is a case of blighted growth, as his name suggests; he is physically and emotionally withered. By the end of the novel, he comes out as a “Human being... completely destroyed” (TLGC:172) by the worst features of rural southern life ignorance, poverty, racism, and violence. Because Grange cannot make an adequate living for his family, his ego finally erodes and he comes to see himself as a “slave”, a “robot”, and a “cipher”.

A study of Brownfield's character reveals a tragic pattern of steady decline in the context of the socio-economic condition he has to live in. The racist environment contributes to the growth of his impulses to brutalize his woman for his own failures and frustration. He becomes so cruel and callous that ultimately he shoots her dead. Brownfield's treatment of his wife is perhaps one of the most savagely accounts of wife abuse in the black family. When he realizes that he cannot escape poverty in the sharecropping economy and will not amount to anything in the racist system, he begins to take out his frustration and anger on his wife, Mem. His marriage with her begins with moments of passion and dreams of a bright future. During his meetings with Mem in Dew Drop Inn before marriage he felt charmed by her warmth and tenderness. He thought of her as of another mother, the kind his own had not been. Someone to be loved and spoken to softly, someone never to frighten with his rough, coarse ways" (TLGC:66). He feels proud of his marriage with Mem and recalls her love and beauty with fondness: “THREE YEARS LATER...he could still look back on their wedding day as the pinnacle of his achievement in extricating himself from evil and the devil and aligning himself with love” (TLGC:72).

It was a choice well-made and Mem had a soothing and nourishing effect on Brownfield when he felt weary and dejected: “She was so good to him, so much what he needed, that her body became his shrine” (TLGC:72). Under the magic of her tender warmth, he grew big and grew firm with love, and grew strong" (TLGC:73). Like many marriages, Brownfield's marriage also began with a dream of happy, decent and independent house for his wife and children with a chauffeur driven car. He had planned to do sharecropping only for two years and then to move northward for a brighter life of freedom and prosperity. They worked hard at the farm but the sharecropping system proved to be too oppressive and exploitative to let them make enough money and leave for the land of their dreams. Even after three years of grueling labour at the farm Brownfield found himself stuck up in poverty and debt. He had to make his wife and even

his little daughter Daphnie work in the field. He had to teach, his frail five-year-old daughter the “tricky, dangerous and disgusting business of hand mopping the cotton bushes with arsenic to keep off boll weevils” (TLGC:77). He ultimately realised that “his life was becoming a repetition of his father’s” (TLGC:78).

Feeling of Helplessness and Despair

The frustration of his dreams and desires deepens his feeling of helplessness and despair in the face of the racist economic system. This destroys his sense of self-confidence and worth, his failure to provide his wife and children with a decent life gives a crushing blow to his spirits and his sense of self-respect as a man. His injured pride and ego prey upon his mind and soul, destroying all that was positive and creative in him. It pushes him deep into a feeling of guilt and self-reproach, his warped heart and mind see in his wife and children a constant and painful reminder of his failures as husband and father. This, ultimately, generates in him anger and rage which he unleashes freely on Mem and their helpless children.

Unable to turn his frustration and anger into any positive or creative activity, he pours it out in the form of aggression which he uses as a response to his conditions. He begins to abuse Mem whom he had once loved so passionately because she was plump and quiet. He had fallen in love with her because “she was graceful and a good teacher, because she put some attention to what she was saying in it, and some warmth from her own self, and so much concern for the person she was talking to that it made Brownfield want to cry”(TLGC:67-68). But his frustration and rage slowly blind him to all these qualities in Mem which had once fascinated him so much. He begins by hurting her feelings and her sense of honour by charging of being “unfaithful to him, of being used by the white men, his oppressors; a charge she tearfully and truth fully denied” (TLGC:78).

Their once mutual passionate love deteriorates fast and Brownfield starts abusing her body by taking her in his drunkenness and in the midst of his foul accusations “she wilted and accepted him in total passivity and blankness, like a church...He determined at such times to treat her like a nigger and a whore, which he knew she was not, and if she made no complaint, to find her guilty” (TLGC:78-79).

Brownfield's violence at this point knows no bounds and after “countless accusations of her infidelity, his crushed pride, his battered ego, made him drag Mem away from schoolteaching” (TLGC:79). Her learning which he once so admired becomes too much for his sick soul to bear as 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!” (TLGC:79). He inflicts injuries on her sense of honour, integrity and pride by lashing her with his foul tongue and sexual abuses. He turns brutal and begins to use cruelty on her body in a bestial manner.

The narrator lays bare the nature and cause of the inhuman violence that Brownfield perpetrates on Mem: “It was his rage at himself, and his, life and his world that made him beat her for an imaginary attraction she aroused in other men, crackers, although she was no party to

any of it. His rage and his anger and his frustration ruled. His rage could and did blame everything, everything on her" (*TLGC:79*).

Saving the Future

Brownfield gloats in Mem's misery and suffering when she is weak, sick and down with the burden of repeated pregnancies forced on her by him. His destructive frustration and rage does not spare even the innocent and helpless children who are exposed constantly to the dehumanizing condition of violence and poverty. When Mem tries to save the future of her daughters it only hurts Brownfield's ego as a man and inflames his rage against her.

Knowing that the future of her daughters depends on her, Mem takes on the responsibility of her family in her own hands. She tries to defy Brownfield and takes up the job of a school teacher. She works, earns and saves for her family and they, move to a lease-bound house in a town. This gives them a better social status and the realization of their dream for a decent life seems to be not too distant a possibility. But this is the work of Mem; this success of hers reminds Brownfield only of his failures.

This adds salt to the injury on account of his failures and he sees in her success a challenge and an insult to his pride and authority as a man. Unable to put up with the success of a woman, he grows more vicious and is out to destroy her. His rage destroys his sanity completely and he grows wild. One night, Brownfield waits on the porch for her as she returns from her work as a maid, aims the gun with drunken accuracy right into her face and fired" (*TLGC:172*). Brownfield, thereafter, destroys the whole family.

Treatment of Aggression

Walker's treatment of aggression in the personality and behaviour of Brownfield is indeed, a classic study in racist aggression. She has brought out the blackest aspect of the black male in a very forceful manner in the character of Brownfield. What makes her treatment so effective and realistic is her dramatization of the motives behind Brownfield's act of aggression against his wife and children. She shows how and why black male turns into an oppressor of his woman as a result of his own oppression in the racist economic and social system. Walker's understanding of the psyche of the black male is deep and incisive. Violence for him is a method to reassert his authority as a father and husband so that he could feel a little bit like a man" (*TLGC:136*).

Walker also sees the more insidious aspect of the black woman's situation demoralised and debased by inhuman white colonizer and plantation owner, she is doubly shamed and brutalized by her own man and is thus irretrievably doomed to a catch-22 situation of life-in death which is Alice Walker's metaphysical 'third life'.

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