



## CLASS EXPLOITATION IN ALICE WALKER'S NOVEL, *THE THIRD LIFE OF GRANGE COPELAND*

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### Abstract

*The racist capitalist white people control the economy and the political powers to exploit the African Americans. The rich white people trapped the black labourers and menial workers in the brutal cycle of the labour mechanism and paid them low wages and manipulated their labour. The origin of poverty and economic destitution depicted by Walker is in the slavery which relegated the blacks' existence to the mere cheap labourers and did not provide any scope for their liberation and emancipation. Devoid of education, the blacks remained ignorant about their exploitation and failed miserably to upgrade their socio-economic conditions. The dominant rich white class became rich after entrapping the blacks in the brutal cycle of manual labour work and denied them their fundamental right to live with pride and dignity. In the present paper, an attempt has been done to explore the life and plight of African Americans who suffered from the racial inequalities and class exploitation.*

**Keywords-** Racism, exploitation, capitalist, Class oppression, sharecropping

### Introduction:

The trinity of the race, gender and class degraded the positions of African Americans and entrapped them in the brutal cycle of exploitation. The capitalist white American society exploits the labour of African American people and degrades their positions in society. The imposition of menial labour works on the African American people results in utter poverty and the economic destitution. It ultimately denies their right to live with dignity and pride. Deprived of opportunities in the industrialist capitalist society, the African Americans suffered miserably and tried to survive in debilitating conditions in white America.

### Sharecropping, a Brutal way to Exploit African Americans:

The blacks who were brought as the slave owners were forced to do the menial works for the white masters and rejected their existence as human beings. Though, the slavery ended in America, it continued in the vilest form of the sharecropping system. After the abolition of slavery, the blacks had no opportunity to survive in the capitalist society and poverty forced them to work on the cotton farms of the white masters. Even after working for years together, they could not earn much to meet the basic requirements and necessities in their lives. To solve their economic problems, they borrowed money from the white landlords and continued to work and repay the amount which they could not make as the white masters took undue advantages of their ignorance of education and compelled them to work for years together on their farms as labourers. Geeta Bindal rightly observes, "The voices of the oppressed are not those of race and gender alone. Class exploitation is the greatest source of oppression of blacks in white America." (162)

### Class Exploitation in Racist Industrialist World:

Grange Copeland, Margaret, Brownfield, and Mem represent the poor African Americans. They are the symbols of poverty. In the racist capitalist society, they are forced to do the menial

works and paid less in the South. Grange and Brownfield remain sharecroppers. Margaret and Mem are compelled to carry out the works of maids. They represent the victims of the capitalist racist order. They get low and irregular incomes and struggle to survive in the oppressive conditions. “To be a poor man is hard, but to be a poor race in a land of dollars is the very bottom of hardships,” says E. B. Du Bois and this is true of Grange, Margaret, Brownfield, Mem, and the child workers in Walker’s *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*. (13) Alice Walker does not only project the dark aspect of African American life but also presents the critique of the capitalist society to free the nation from the bloody agenda of the rich racist capitalist society.

### **Copeland Family, a Victim of Race-Based Class Oppression:**

Grange Copeland represents the plight of the labourers in the plantation system. He works for Shipley and fails to pay off the debt he had taken from him. He is overworked by the white landlord. Even his wife Margaret becomes the victim of the white master’s lust. She is overworked in the cotton field and paid meagre amount. To pay off the money, her husband borrowed from him, she is compelled to trade her body. She gives birth to a white baby and suffers miserably after Grange Copeland deserts her. She commits suicide and leaves her son, Brownfield orphaned. After Grange Copeland deserts his family, Brownfield is left alone. To survive in the hostile world without parents, he continues the work of sharecropper and suffers endless miseries humiliations and tortures from his white masters. He marries Mem, a schoolteacher and further tries to change the prospects in their lives. His trap in the brutal cycle of sharecropping system and the exploitation inherent in it fails him miserably to deliver his promises to his family. In case of Grange, the white landlord, Shipley creates such circumstances that the other white landlords do not offer him job and he is forced to work for Shipley, but Brownfield is not allowed to settle at one place by the white landowners. At each place, he is overworked and paid less. He reveals, “I don’t make much money... the white folks don’t give us decent houses to live in.” He is even often fired from his job without any reason and compelled to search for the work at the place of other white landlords. As he is propelled to move from place to place, his family suffers endless. Mem Copeland finds it unendurable as she is forced to move from one shabby place to the other. At each new place, she must begin everything a new and also to remake every dirty shack worth to live for her children. These hardships break her spirit and make her suffer the depression which the millions of the African American women experienced in America. The omniscient narrator observes,

Each time she stepped into a new place, with its new, and usually bigger rat holes, she wept. Each time she had to clean cow manure out of a room to make it habitable for her children, she looked as if she had been dealt a death blow. Each time she was forced to live in a house that was enclosed in a pasture with cows and animals eager to eat her flowers before they were planted, she became like a woman walking through a dream, but a woman who had forgotten what it is to wake up. She logged along, ploddingly, like a cow herself, for the sake of the children. (*Walker 77-78*)

It is not Mem who suffers from this moving but also her children. After her husband is constantly forced to move from one place to the other, she fails to provide education to her children. So, the poverty and the sharecropping system brutally victimises African American women and children in the brutal cycle of exploitation. Even though, Mem works as a schoolteacher, she too is paid very less. It is her husband’s insensitivity towards her teaching profession, she stops teaching. Like Grange, Brownfield too fails to realise the worth and importance of education and does not support Mem in her endeavour to continue her teaching profession and even offer higher education to his daughters.

Even they are not in condition to afford fruits to children. While the white landlords and their families enjoyed the luxuries of nutritious food and fruits, the Grange Copeland family fails to provide it to Brownfield. Later, Brownfield too fails to offer fruits to his children. His children could only have fruits at Christmas. After Grange brings the bags of fruits to his grandchildren, Brownfield feels jealous of his children. The omniscient narrator observes, “It was only at Christmas that Brownfield’s children got apples and oranges and grapes. As a child Brownfield had never seen a

grape. He clutched the bags in a confusion of feeling. He was hungry, he was suffering from a malaise of the spirit, he was jealous of his children's good fortune. He wishes he did not have children down whose gullets the good fruit would go; he wished he were a child himself." (Walker 90)

The whites lived in the cosy, posh and comfortable cottages whereas the blacks lived in the poor houses and suffered from the deadly cold. Brownfield, Mem and their daughters Daphne and Ornette lived in a small shack and slept in one small room and struggled to survive in the bitter cold:

"In winter, usually they all slept in the same room. Brownfield, Mem, Daphne, and Ornette; because it was impossible to heat two rooms in such a hole-filled house. It was impossible, really to heat one room; but when four people slept together in one small room and kept a fire going they could manage not to freeze to death before summer." (Walker 90-91)

It is not the food and fruits, but also the medical facilities, the blacks suffered. The white landowners could afford the expensive medical facilities whereas the blacks could not. They lived poverty-stricken lives and suffered the agonies resulting from it. Brownfield and Mem Copeland are too poor, that they cannot afford the medical facilities for themselves and children. At the time of Mem's delivery, he watches her helplessly and tries to avoid the children to witness the sight of childbirth. Mem undergoes the labour pains at home and delivers baby at night in rainy season:

Brownfield looked over his shoulder at his wife's folded pallet. Not wanting the children to see the blood she had folded it as neatly as a newspaper and had tied it with string. There was a sheet hanging before Mem's bed. It formed a curtain which would have protected her children from the sight of childbirth. Brownfield thought what a blessing it must have been to Mem that the baby was born at night while Daphne and Ornette Slept and wind and rain muffled her sounds of struggle. (Walker 92)

The child labour is another crucial problem highlighted by Walker. All the child workers help their parents in the cotton field. They assist in loading the sacks in the truck. The omniscient narrator records, "The children's job was to go over the rows their parents had gone over the week before- "scrapping cotton" it was called. When the children saw their parents puts down their sacks they came and stood beside them at the edge of the field as all of them waited for the truck to come." (Walker 8) Similarly, Brownfield too assists his parents in the cotton field. He is over worked for hours together and paid very less. As the extreme poverty in his family forces him to work as a child labourer, he does not get the opportunity to go to school and learn. Grange's failure to send Brownfield to school, Even though Margaret strongly desires for it, ultimately leads to the life of a menial worker. He starts working in the cotton field at the age of six. Like the other child labourers, he too does not get opportunity to education and continues to work in the cotton field even in his youth. After Brownfield marries Mem, a schoolteacher, like his father, he too fails to see the worth and importance of education in changing the prospects in their lives. He too does not take his three daughters' education seriously. Like him, his daughters too become the victim of child labour in their childhood. His daughters are forced to work in the cotton field and exploited brutally.

### **Conclusion:**

African Americans are brutally exploited in the capitalist society. They are not offered the better job opportunities in the white America. While white women get the job opportunities to work as receptionists, employees and nurses, African American women are destined to the low paid jobs and the works of maids, cooks, and nannies. This is very much a reality which Ruth notices when she happens to witness the cruelty of the capitalist industries which ruthlessly launch in the newspaper advertisements. Extreme poverty and the economic destitution too propel them to surrender to the whims of the rich landlords and even to prostitute to themselves to fill their stomach. Margaret, Mem and Josie suffer due to extreme poverty. After Grange fails to return the loan, the white landlord victimises Margaret. She trades her body to compensate for the loan her husband had taken from the landlord. Mem is too forced to do the work of maid at the houses of the whites and paid meagre amount. Ultimately, the trinity of the race, gender and class degrades the positions of African Americans and entraps them in the brutal cycle of exploitation in racist classist society.

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