

Transcending the Inauspicious Curse? Black Violence and the Victim-focused Identity in Alice Walker's Works

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Abstract

The paper explores the presentation of violence in Alice Walker's works ranging from domestic violence, public fighting and murder in general. I argue that the black men's family is portrayed as an arena for violent manifestations. Being the architect of such violent manifestations, the Blackman strike readers as an individual who is always being assailed by an ill-defined curse, a black American curse and as "feeble minded" as he is projected to be, he fails to transcend that inauspicious curse. He thus becomes the worst enemy of the black family, always playing the blame the victim trump card; beating his wife and women in general, castigating and cajoling the very premise upon which strong filial bonds can be predicated upon. Thus, in the process he puts the black woman in a double bind where she has to grapple with a wider and vicious system and where she also has to tame the "rabid" and "unthinking brute" for a husband or for a father. Plausible as Walker's projections may look to be, I argue that what Walker does is to merely churn out stereotypes and given the fact that stereotypes are used to categorise black people and they act as a control mechanism against possible retaliation of the atrocities committed over centuries such a presentation is fraught with problems. These stereotypes are made to "make visible the invisible...and to make fast, firm and separate what is fluid and the norm...than the dominant (bourgeoisie middle class) value system cares to admit.(Dyer, 1993, p16) Such a projection makes violence a unique black crime that can only be resolved in the African American community by taming the black man, however, I argue that such a projection defies logic and cannot go unchallenged.

Key words: violence, African American, stereotype, fighting, murder

Introduction

In the novel *Meridian*, Annie Marion tells Meridian, "I know violence is as American as cherry pie!" (*Meridian*, p.18) This statement sums up the nature of the black family and community presented in *In Love and Trouble*, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down* and in *The Color Purple*. An assessment of these works by Alice Walker reveals a society that is plagued by physical and verbal violence in both the domestic and public spheres. The African American family in particular and the community at large is presented as "pathological in character," in the words of Angela Davis (1984, p75). It is a community where crimes such as: fights, attempted murder and murder are rife. This paper focuses on violence under the subtitles; domestic violence, public fighting and murder in general.

Domestic Violence

In Alice Walker's works, the black family is presented as an arena for violent manifestations characterised by husband and wife battering, child abuse, malicious injury to property and gross verbal abuses. An examination of the relationships of Grange Copeland and Margaret, Grange and Josie, Uncle Buster and his wife, Brownfield and Mem in *The Third life of Grange Copeland*, Meridian's grandmother and her husband in *Meridian*, Celie and Albert, Harpo and Sofia, reveals black families beset with difficulties. In the aforementioned relationships, men are mainly the culprits as they use violence to dominate women. Also by some absurd logic, the men beat their wives in an attempt to regain the feeling of control that has become illusory in the Caucasian dominated social system. Thus, wrong notions of masculinity influence the recycling of violence within the black family.

Also, violence does incapacitate characters with the consequence that when they try to relate to the wider community, they are lacking confidence. In a society where black people are habitually associated with crime, it becomes pertinent to question why a writer would give hideous depictions of racial stereotypes as she projects black people engaged in crime. If Walker sets out to extricate African American experience from the dominant labels, then: To what extent is she successful?

In a study that puts into perspective the criminalisation of black people and subsequent incarceration in America, Angela Davis contends:

32.2 percent of young black men and 12.3 percent of young Latino men between the ages of twenty and twenty-nine are either in prison, in jail, or on probation or parole. This is in comparison with 6.7 percent of young white men. A total of 827 440 young African American males are under the supervision of the criminal justice system at the cost of \$6 billion per year. (Davis in McLaughlin, et al, 2003, p285)

Although Davis's analysis is from a sociological perspective and is reflective of the diverse American demographic landscape in relation to incarceration for various crimes in the mid 1990s, it would be improper to miss the fact that black people bear the 'criminal label', the most. Moreover, "... the racial imbalance, in incarcerated populations is not recognized as evidence of structural racism but as a consequence of the assumed criminality of black people". (Ibid, p286)

In "Her Sweet Jerome" in *In Love and Trouble*, the woman protagonist's problems are said to have started when she gets in love with Jerome Franklin Washington III. From the outset, Jerome Franklin Washington III is violent, venting his anger and disapproval on the woman most of the time. Even before they get married:

(He) was beating her black and blue even then, so that every time you saw her she was sporting her "shades". She could not open her mouth without him wincing or pretending he couldn't stand it, so he would knock her out of the room to keep her from talking to him. (*In Love and Trouble*, pp26-27)

The marriage of the protagonist to Jerome Franklin is devoid of love and comfort. Where the protagonist yearns for appreciation the husband concentrates on reading books. The loveless home environment leads the protagonist to believe the rumour that her husband was having an affair with someone else. The protagonist tries to search for that "someone" whom she thinks her husband is having an affair with. As she goes about searching, the omniscient narrator argues: "Jerome went on reading". (Ibid, p29). The story gives interesting revelations in that even when the protagonist stalks her husband, she fails to find someone serve to discover that her husband is a member of a group of friends. Within this group, the narrator contends, "women wore kinky hair and large loop earrings", and they called each other with what they termed "their "African" names". (Ibid., p31) Suggested in the narrative is the idea that somehow the group is instrumental in breeding the hostile environment at the protagonist home.

Jerome, the abusive husband refers to members of the group as "comrades" and this is done "jokingly (or not jokingly, for all she knew)". (Ibid.) Thus, in addition to the physical violence, the woman protagonist is exposed to psychological violence. A perceptive comprehension of the domestic violence in "Her Sweet Jerome" reveals that the black revolutionary spirit is being criminalised and the derisive reference to the so called "African" names" is meant to parody members within the Black Power Movement who tried to relate to their African roots in the African American community. Moreover, the "comrade" tag is also placed to foreground the ideological confusion that characterise such groupings as this hints at the socialist ideology where both white people and black people refer to each other as comrade. In such a presentation of the revolution and the Black Power Movement, one sees parallels in American middle class culture where presenting the black revolutionary spirit is a crime and little wonder, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Junior and other black revolutionaries were killed.

Alice Walker further buttresses the criminalisation of the Black Power Movement when she indicates that after a spirited search, the protagonist finally comes across "Books that had fallen from his hands behind the bed over the months of her marriage". (Ibid, p33) Conspicuous to the reader are the titles of the books:

Black Rage, Black fire, Black Anger, Black Revenge, Black Vengeance, Black Hatred, Black Beauty, Black Revolution..., Revolution in the streets, Revolution on Rooftops, Revolution and Rebellion, Revolution and Black People in the United States, Revolution and Death. (*Ibid.*, p34)

In the foregoing, it is not accidental that the list ends with “Revolution and Death” and the cumulative effect is that the revolution comes to nothing. Convinced that the literature on black revolution is the main cause of the violent domestic environment, the protagonist rips and stabs the books with knives. Ultimately, she sets the house on fire. Thus, by the time the protagonist commits arson, the readers’ minds have already been prepared for this as the narrator presents a nasty and loveless domestic environment as if to say, “who can live under these conditions?”

Alice Walker is making a statement to the effect that as long as the black woman is trapped in an ugly marriage, the revolutionary spirit is doomed. Such an interpretation of the story is in line with the views of critics who argue that Alice Walker calls for workable relationships between black men and black women, that is, as Africana womanism puts it. (Hudson-Weems, 2004, pp1-5) Another interpretation of the story amounts to an outright condemnation of the Black Power Movement, the revolutionary spirit among African Americans and the idea of trying to relate with Africa.

It is clear that the story is more of a condemnation of the revolution as it offers a parody of African American literature written during the Black Power Movement that was popularised in America in the Civil rights era. Thus, where Alice Walker would want us to see domestic violence in “Her Sweet Jerome”, she inadvertently toes the line of bourgeois middle class culture which, apart from viewing the Black Power Movement and Civil Rights extended to black people with scepticism also criminalises black men. In the end Jerome Franklin III’s involvement in the Black Power Movement is given as the main cause of his abusive behaviour.

According to Alice Walker, the revolution turns out to be a fad. In a revealing statement that is also reflective of the author’s opinion towards the revolution, Truman tells Meridian:

The leaders were killed, the restless young were bought with anti-poverty jobs, and clothing styles of the poor were copied by seventh avenue...in addition, the public white swimming pool, having been ordered by the federal government opened to blacks, was closed by city officials (whites)... who had their own private swimming pools. (*Meridian*, p134)

If anything, the revolution breeds snobbishness in African American men like Jerome Franklin Washington III and it produces clownish African American women as typified by the women with “kinky hair” who call each other by what they term their “African” names in “Her Sweet Jerome”. It also breeds unanchored individuals like Wangero Leewanika Kimanjo in “Everyday Use” in *In Love and Trouble*.

In *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, the black family is riddled with violence. In weekly diary forms, Alice Walker shows similarities that characterise Grange and Margaret’s relationship to that of Grange’s son Brownfield and his wife Mem. In both marriages, wife battering is presented as the main pre-occupation of the men. Saturday nights are presented as the worst times of the week. In the case of Grange, we are told:

Late Saturday night Grange would come home lurching drunk, threatening to kill his wife and Brownfield, stumbling and shooting his shotgun...Grange would roll out the door and into the yard, crying like a child in big wrenching sobs.. (*The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, p.12.)

Wife beating or the running away of the wife and child to hide in the woods often follows such behaviour. The fact that Brownfield is exposed to his father’s brutality as a child is not enough to stop him from doing the same to his family later on. Like his father Grange, “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 in becoming a haggard autonomous witch,...” (*Ibid.*, p55.)

Here we see Brownfield playing the “blame the victim” trump card where he accuses Mem for his failure in life. Brownfield, as his name signifies, is a victim of the sharecropping system with its brown fields that is controlled by whites as typified by Shipley.

Though Brownfield identifies his problem he fails to put himself in a position to try and address it. Instead of confronting racism head on, he vents his frustration on the wife and children. In a revealing and judgemental statement, the omniscient narrator states:

Brownfield ... enslaved his own family, given them weakness when they needed strength, made them powerless before any enemy that stood beyond him. Now when (his children) ...thought of "the enemy", their own father would straddle their vision.(Ibid.,p227)

Overall, the authorial statement is important in that it brings out Brownfield as the chief culprit of domestic violence. However it looks as though Brownfield is not aware that he is committing crimes. Like Grange before him, Brownfield believes "that white folks are to blame for everything including his behaviour."(Christian in Mari Evans, p.460). The abject poverty that characterises his life infuses in him an intense feeling of emasculation. As such, his notion of manhood is grounded on the need to "impose his power by inflicting violence on the women around him" (Ibid.) Alice Walker makes a contribution to the effect that the historic repression of the black people in America has created psychological problems in black men. In this case the black men become amoral, unethical and dishonourable as they can hardly distinguish crime from everyday life. The black man's role as the provider of the family is dented and he is reduced to a state of helplessness. Thus manhood becomes a prized thing for the black men to the point where "by any means necessary" it becomes pertinent to ascertain it.

Alice Walker rightly points out at racial inequalities as the source of the black man's financial problems and material depravity in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*. However, the idea of having a Blackman take full responsibility of his actions, though plausible, has the effect of downplaying the influence of the environment in shaping character. In spite of the fact that Brownfield may want to be a responsible individual, the system is such that he does not achieve much. There are some telling incidents, for instance, when the omniscient narrator captures Mem's frustration thus,"Being forced to move from one sharecropper's cabin to another was something she hated. She hated the arrogance of the white men who put them out, for one reason or another, without warning or explanation.."(*The Third life*, p.58-59).

One observes insurmountable forces that militate against the black family in America. In the essay "Recognising Stereotypical Images of African Americans in Television and Movies," Steven Gray argues that the relegation of black people to a life of poverty and 'uselessness' tends to create a situation where they end up internalising negative images about themselves. (<http://www.yale.edu/y-hti/curriculum/units/1996/3/96.03.05>) Brownfield lacks everything that is expected of a father in bourgeois middle class culture and that lack becomes the basis on which Mem devises a ten-point resolution. At gunpoint, Brownfield is told by Mem,"...you going to learn to eat your meals like a gentleman, you ain't going to eat like no pig at my table. You going to use spoons and knives and forks like everybody else that got some sense."(*The Third Life*, p96)

In addition, she demands to be called Mem, Mrs Copeland, or Mrs Mem R Copeland. Mem's ten-point resolution becomes a call to Brownfield to espouse bourgeois middle class culture and do away with what Shelby Steele dubs the "victim-focused black identity.(Shelby Steel, 1989,30). Expanding on this identity, Steele argues:

The victim-focused black identity encourages the individual to feel that his advancement depends almost entirely on that of the group. Thus he loses sight not only of his own possibilities but of the inextricable connection between individual effort and individual advancement.(Ibid)

Brownfield's victim focused identity, itself a scapegoat for shunning responsibility is presented in the novel as absurd. He hates the system to the point of making his wife pretend she is crippled to escape admiration of white men. Furthermore, he beats his wife to change even her dialect, "Why don't you talk like the rest of us poor niggers...Why do you always have to be damn proper?"(*The Third*, p56)

Like Grange, Brownfield and uncle Buster in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, the narrator says that Meridian's grandfather: "beat his wife and children with more pleasure than he beat the mules".(*Meridian*, p.122) In addition to the physical assaults, Meridian's grandmother bears twelve children and out of them all, only her mother gets the privilege to go to school. One common characteristic of the violent men projected in Alice Walker's works is their inability and refusal to send their children to school. Given the importance of education in bourgeoisie middle class culture, the men condemn their children to a life of "ignorance".

Thus, one is reminded of Margaret's wish to send Brownfield to school only to be shrugged by Grange, "the shrug being the end of that particular dream". Similarly, in *The Color Purple*, Alphonso takes Celie out of school and she puts it, "The first time I got big Pa took me out of school. He never care that I love it" (*The Color*, p11).

In *The Color Purple*, men and women perpetrate domestic violence where men are the main offenders. Sofia's life is characterised by hostility as she fights back her brothers, uncles, her father and cousins. Sofia's life is indicative of the family life in the African American society as seen by Walker. In *The Color Purple*, even Celie, a woman believes that a woman has to be kept at her place with the help of beating. No wonder, in *The Color Purple* wife battering is endemic and one notices this in the strained relationships of Alphonso and Celie's mother and Albert and Celie. Celie confides: "He beat me like he beat the children. Cept he don't never hardly beat them. He say, Celie, git the belt", (*Ibid*, p23) and the overall effect is that the black family becomes the haven of all forms of abuses. In a vivid dramatisation of domestic violence, the fights between Sofia and Harpo offer remarkable appraisal in that they confirm certain traits "known to be" in the fat mammy stereotype in America namely care freeness, physical and ill-directed strength, imprudence and arrogance.

In a scene that provides amusement to the reader, Celie recounts:

I open the door cautious, thinking bout robbers and murders... it Harpo and Sofia. They fighting like two mens. Every piece of furniture they got is turned over. Every plate look like it broke. The looking glass hang crooked, the curtains torn. The bed look like the stuffing pulled out..(*Ibid*, p37)

What makes the reader pity Harpo is his unquestioning acceptance of Celie's advice. Implementing the advice turns out to be nightmarish. As if to say, violence is very normal in this black family, after the fistfight, Harpo, Sofia and "the two babies were...going off for weekend" (*Ibid*).

Alice Walker contends that the violent images within the black family ought not to be conceptualised as stereotypes, "prisons of image" (Walker in Gray. *Opcit.*) as she calls them. The reader cannot help associate these images with the subculture of violence in the black community. If we are to argue that literature is mainly composed of typical characters or representative characters it becomes agonizingly spectacular that the black family as presented in Alice Walker's works confirms the pathological nature ascribed to it by white America. Writing against such a presentation of the black family, Angela Davis argues:

To focus myopically on family problems as the basis for the oppression of African American community as if setting the family in order will automatically eradicate poverty is to espouse the fallacious "blame the victim argument". (Davis, 1983, p75)

In as much as readers can buy into Davis' own contention, Alice Walker's contention that the black men have the individual willpower to change his ways and situation holds water to some extent.

Unlike Grange, Brownfield, Albert and Alphonso, Samuel in *The Color Purple*, having embraced Christianity (Christianity being a positive feature under American Puritan morality) is presented as the ideal husband. Little wonder, Nettie marries him after the death of Corrine and she says: "he tells me he loves me plump and graying". (*Color Purple*, p204) Contrary to the "brutal" and "savage" men such as Albert, Alphonso, Grange and Brownfield, Samuel prioritises education for the children and it is stated that he has money and a plan "for the education of the children once we return home". (*Ibid*.p205)

Given the differences in the presentation of the father in the black family in Alice Walker's works and the turmoil therein, it is therefore not an understatement to state that Alice Walker is of the opinion that unless and until the Blackman learns to shun criminal behaviour and embrace bourgeoisie middle class culture, preferably Christianity, then he will always ill-treat black women. Though Walker relates the criminal behaviour to years of repression by the white system, she believes that a black man can surmount this if he learns to account for his own action and stop blaming the system.

Public fighting

The African American community is presented as constituting a haven of what Malvin Wolfgang terms “the subculture of violence”. (Wolfgang in Brownmiller, 1975, p196) The African American people are presented as people who have less regard for their fellows’ well being. The various assaults, fights and attempted murder(s) in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* and assaults in *The Color Purple* reveal a society that is way below what Claudia Tate calls bourgeois civility, domesticity and propriety. (Claudia Tate in Cheryl A Wall, p106) The implication of such a projection of the African American lifestyle is that it assumes “a merger of black and white expression at the “Narcissistic level”. (Houston A Baker Jr, 1984, p.73) It is not fortuitous that the narrative tone in Alice Walker’s works is not heavy. Rather the narrative tone is entertaining and enjoyable. Thus, like “coons” and “bucks”, most of Alice Walker’s male characters are renowned for brutality, craziness and savagery.

In *The Third life of Grange Copeland*, Brownfield’s brutality is projected as being complimentary to the wider repressive and violent system. The system debases his masculinity to a point where he loathes himself and violence at home compensates for the wounded pride. In public, we are told “he would get beaten by whomever he picks a fight with” and on being brought home, his usual phrase is “I got my goddam pride, I is”. (*The Third life*, p117) Violence at home can thus be interpreted as a recycling of violence in the whole community. It looks, as though, characters that fit well in the community presented in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* are those who are quick to adapt to the violence. Lorene offers a good example as we are told “she was noted for her expert use of the razor” and once “she cut up a customer’s wife and then run the customer out...while the wife almost bled to death”. (*Ibid*.p44) Lorene being on the wrong adapts to violent behaviour as a survival strategy and this pays dividends in that her morality in taking the woman’s husband is not subjected to public scrutiny. Grange engages in public fighting as a survival strategy. In the North, we are told he fights Italians, Poles, and Jews. Thus fighting for him is a rite of passage in the racially segregated society. The idea of racial segregation compounded with a feeling of wounded manhood turns Grange into a “brute.” The characterisation of Grange is close to an anthropological confirmation of the stereotypes of the African American as a mugger, a robber and a brutal character.

In line with the retrieval of wounded pride through violence by African American men, in *Meridian*, one sees in Tommy Odds’s violent strategy with the Niggers on the Corner Voters Machine a confirmation of a stereotype. Given the “perceived” violent nature of the Blackman in the mindset of Caucasian America, it comes as no surprise to note that among the strategies employed by Tommy Odds’s group is the “picketing of downtown stores,” (*Meridian*,p102) where people are beaten and are scared away from buying. In this case, Tommy Odds’s group is akin to the Seven Days, a violent “gang” captured in Toni Morrison’s *The Song of Solomon* whose main purpose is to revenge on the various forms of gratuitous violence visited by whites on blacks. What becomes questionable in such a presentation of the black community is whether this necessarily projects the white controlled system, as evil to the point where resorting to violence becomes the only option to deal with it? Or such a presentation is more of an anthropological confirmation of black criminality. Embracing the second notion would give credibility to the discomfiture of white people in the presence of black people, as it tends to sustain the myth of the ever-violent black menace.

In *The Color Purple*, Alice Walker’s characters fair no better as violence is shown to be prevalent. In what constitutes a public gathering at Harpo’s place, Squeak braves the odds and dares to slap Sofia who just arrives in the company of Henry Broadrax (the prize fighter). As if to say fighting prowess is a virtue, Broadrax has unsanctioned freedom and he declares to Harpo “I don’t fight Sofia battle...My job to love her and take her where she want to go.” (*Color Purple*, p78) Harpo having been emasculated by Sofia, Broadrax is presented as the alternative, hence the constant reference to the title “Prize fighter”. Describing a public fight that ensue between Squeak and Sofia, Celie says:

What she do that for. Sofia don’t even deal in little ladyish things such as slaps. She ball up her fist, draw back, and knock two of Squeak’s side teef out. Squeak hit the floor. One toof hanging on her lip, the other one upside my cold drink glass. (*Ibid*.,p79)

The fight shows Sofia as a powerful woman someone akin to what Celie dubs the “amazons” women. Presenting Sofia in this way in *The Color Purple* tends to neutralise Police brutality on her. The characterisation of Sofia presents a justification of police presence in the black neighbourhood.

In Alice Walker's works, one sees a society that is characterised by moral chaos, moral perversion, social anarchy, debasement of the family, individual and communal ideals. Physical, psychological and emotional abuses are rife signifying a society where individuals, in pursuit of their base instincts, do what they deem necessary. The question that comes to the reader's mind is what is the way out of all this? One way of looking at the repulsive images is that Alice Walker does not believe in them. As such she exposes them in what amounts to critical realism in order for such black people to re-shape their behaviour and shun crime. The other way of looking at it is that Alice Walker does not necessarily believe in the system that produces such black characters. As such, she brings out the characters to highlight black deprivation, dispossession, poverty and violence in a land of plenty.

In a society where black people were enslaved and are still discriminated against, Alice Walker's presentation is fraught with ambiguities. The portrayal makes a statement to the effect that black people are criminals. We tend to agree with George Gerbner's observation:

Labelling some people ahead of time as barbarous makes it easier to deal with them as barbarians would treat them. Classifying people ahead of time as criminals permit dealing with them in ways otherwise criminal, and makes it legitimate to attack and kill them...Stigmatisation and demonisation isolate their targets and set them up to be victimised. (George Gerbner, 1986)

Where Alice Walker may have intended to show black deprivation, poverty and immorality, she reproduces images that justify their criminalisation, exploitation and incarceration. We therefore insist that in a bid to subvert the stereotypical images of black women as an oppressed people, Alice Walker's portrayal of the black community is pathological. Of course she tries to convince readers as much as possible that the images are not stereotypes but with little success. Thus, the same American bourgeoisie middle class morality, which denigrates black people, characterises Alice Walker's vision. We read with the belief that because she writes them, she does not believe in them but white some folks do.

Murder in general

As confirmation of the prevalence of violence in the American society in general and African American community in particular, murder is rampant in Alice Walker's works. The murder of the daughter by her father in "The Child Who favoured Daughter" in *In Love and Trouble*, the murder of Mem by Brownfield, the murder of Brownfield by Grange and the murder of Grange by the Police in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, the murder of Buba, a white lawyer by the protagonist in "How did I Get Away with killing one of the Biggest Lawyers in the State?" in *You Can't keep a Good Woman Down* and the murder of Annie Julia by her boyfriend in *The Color Purple* reveal that Alice Walker is pre-occupied with projecting the meaninglessness of and the loss of respect for life in the African American community.

In *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, Brownfield shoots Mem, his wife as a way of paying back the embarrassment she inflicts on him when she gets the better of him, batters his head with a gun and spells out a ten point resolution. There are also suggestions to the effect that Brownfield has been incensed by Mem's role as Santa Claus that Christmas earning money and managing to buy some few goods such as "oranges", "peppermint sticks" among others. In doing this, Mem plays the role of family provider and this serves to make Brownfield aware of his shortcomings. To foreground Brownfield's criminal responsibility in the murder, Grange's statement to Ruth is revealing and is equally reflective of Alice Walker's argument that black people ought to be fully accountable of their own lives and cease to blame the white system. Grange states:

The white folks could have forced him to live in shacks...But where was the man in him that let Brownfield kill his wife...He let the cracker hold the gun, because he was weak to distinguish that cracker's will from his!(*The Third Life*, p208.)

Contained in Grange's statements are suggestions to the effect that unless individuals learn to take blame for their crimes and cease to hurl blame to the white system, the society will always have problems.

In an essay "Novelists of Memory", Charles Johnson contends that individualism (which Alice Walker embraces in entirety) seen with its "selfishness, crude materialism and Anglophilia in diverse forms" has a tendency of structuralising racism.(Johnson, 1989, p6.)

Thus, in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, we are made to see Brownfield as an individual who has an insatiable desire to commit crime and taken as a typical character; he confirms the black criminal stereotype. Even Grange whom Alice Walker presents as someone who undergoes a transformation from being a brutal father to Brownfield to a caring grandfather to Ruth ends murdering Brownfield. Where Grange is presented as a thoughtful character that has learnt from experience that:

When white people got you thinking they're to blame for everything there've you thinking they's some kinds of gods!...Nobody's as powerful as we make them out to be. We got our souls, don't we?(*The Third life*, p207)

It becomes difficult to understand his murder of Brownfield serve to assume that it is more of an anthropological confirmation by Alice Walker of the black criminal. The act of shooting Brownfield in court by Grange would leave readers surprised by the level of crime given that someone knowledgeable does it. At this point it looks as if the narrator has lost track of the narrative. The cumulative effect is that by the time Grange gets killed by the Police, instead of seeing the state sanctioned violence in the murder of black people, one is made to see the murder as a resolution to the crisis created by Grange's criminal behaviour.

It is true to argue that Alice Walker is conscious of the State sanctioned violence on black people and this is shown in the presentation of a perverse and discriminate justice system. Walker reveals:

A man's punishment was never written somewhere in a book before his crime was committed – it was not even the same as someone else's punishment for the same crime. The punishment was made to fit the man and not the crime. It was individual punishment. One felt unique in one's punishment if not in one's crime.(*Ibid*, p163)

Thus for a crime such as murder, the accused people are given different verdicts. While in prison, one murderer is made a trustee, could go to church on Sundays and could play poker with the jailors. Although Alice Walker reveals the anomalies in the American criminal justice system, she does not question why there are discrepancies neither does she give a workable solution that black people can embrace to address such anomalies. Addressing the perverse criminal justice system would have made Alice Walker question the very values upon which bourgeoisie middle class morality and its criminalisation of black people is predicated. In *The Third life of Grange Copeland*, the State is presented as the criminal on rare occasions. On the other hand "black" crime and misconception by black people of their criminal liability reverberates throughout the novel. In this light one can argue that like the protagonist in James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of the Ex-Coloured Man*, Alice Walker chooses the "lesser path" by propagating and authenticating the existence of a black criminal in a society where black is "perceived" to be synonymous with crime.

The notion of the black murderer is further authenticated when Grange gains psychic strength and feels a sense of achievement in the death of a white woman whom he ironically wants to save. Grange goes about claiming that he murders the woman whereas the woman opts to drown in a pool rather than clasp Grange's black helping hand. The death of the white woman is significant in that it confirms Grange's scandalous yearning. The narrator argues:

The death of the woman...liberated him. He felt in some way repaid of his own unfortunate life. It was the taking of that white woman's life...that forced him want to try to live again...He believed ...he had stumbled on a necessary act that black men must commit to regain, or to manufacture their manhood, their self respect. They must kill their oppressors".(*Ibid*, p153)

Implied here is the notion that killing a white person is an identity-boosting act among black men. In a society where, when images of "muggers", "killers" and criminals are evoked, images of black people are loom large, the depiction of Grange confirms the very stereotypes.

In "How Did I Get Away with killing one of the Biggest Lawyer in the State?" in *You Can't keep a Good Woman Down*, the protagonist applauds her trickery in managing to kill a white lawyer and getting away with it. Since the lawyer has "raped" her, it is striking to note that the rape is not given as the reason why the lawyer is killed. Rather, an intense feeling of guilt which accrues in the protagonist upon learning that her mother has died in an asylum where the lawyer has commuted her makes the protagonist murder the lawyer.

The protagonist celebrates crime in a way that suggests “That is what I am - a criminal, catch me if you can!” She states:

(He) kept a gun in his desk drawer...I took it out and shot him. ..I don't think I took time to wipe off my fingerprints, because to tell the truth, I couldn't stand it another minute in that place. No one came after me, and I read in the paper the next day that he'd been killed by burglars. (*You Can't keep a Good Woman Down*, p26.)

In a society where black people are known to be prone to some acts of cheating and trickery, the protagonist's confessions confirm criminal behaviour. In addition the protagonist steals money “the carrots he always dangled before me “(*Ibid.*), to enable herself to attend college. Another interpretation of this story would pose the protagonist not as a criminal *per se* but as someone who is responding to a vicious and violent system. The quest to attend college becomes a quest to develop oneself into the educated and well propertied bourgeois class. Such an interpretation makes the story a story of black deprivation, violence and lack of opportunity. Bubba could chastise the protagonist with money and in the process denies her a chance to attend college. Murder and theft become acts that are essential for the narrator if at all the lives of the underprivileged is to be enhanced.

In *The Color Purple*, the murder of Celie's father by his white business competitors and the murder of Albert's wife Anie Julia by her boyfriend are cases that show a society that reeks of violence. Unlike the murder of Celie's father by whites, which, though very central in creating the complication in the novel, is downplayed and is mentioned in passing almost at the end, Annie Julia's murder is mentioned recurrently throughout the novel. The effect of this is that the reader is always reminded of the brutality and criminality of the murderer who is suggestively black. The recurrence of the statements by characters referring to the murder makes the reader to loath the man while making a “martyr” out of Anie Julia who is killed for her personal choices. Thus Annie Julia's boyfriend's brutality and savagery can be interpreted alongside that of Grange, Brownfield and to some extent uncle Buster in *The Third life of Grange Copeland*.

In the portrayal of domestic violence, public fighting and murder, Alice Walker does not seem to concentrate as much outrage at the Caucasian American system as she does on the black people. Where white people kill black people, the murder is mentioned in passing. Also where the police kill black people, it is a puzzle that Walker does not devote the same exposure of the criminality as she does to the black community. Given this situation, it becomes difficult for the author to convince us that she is not churning out stereotypes.

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