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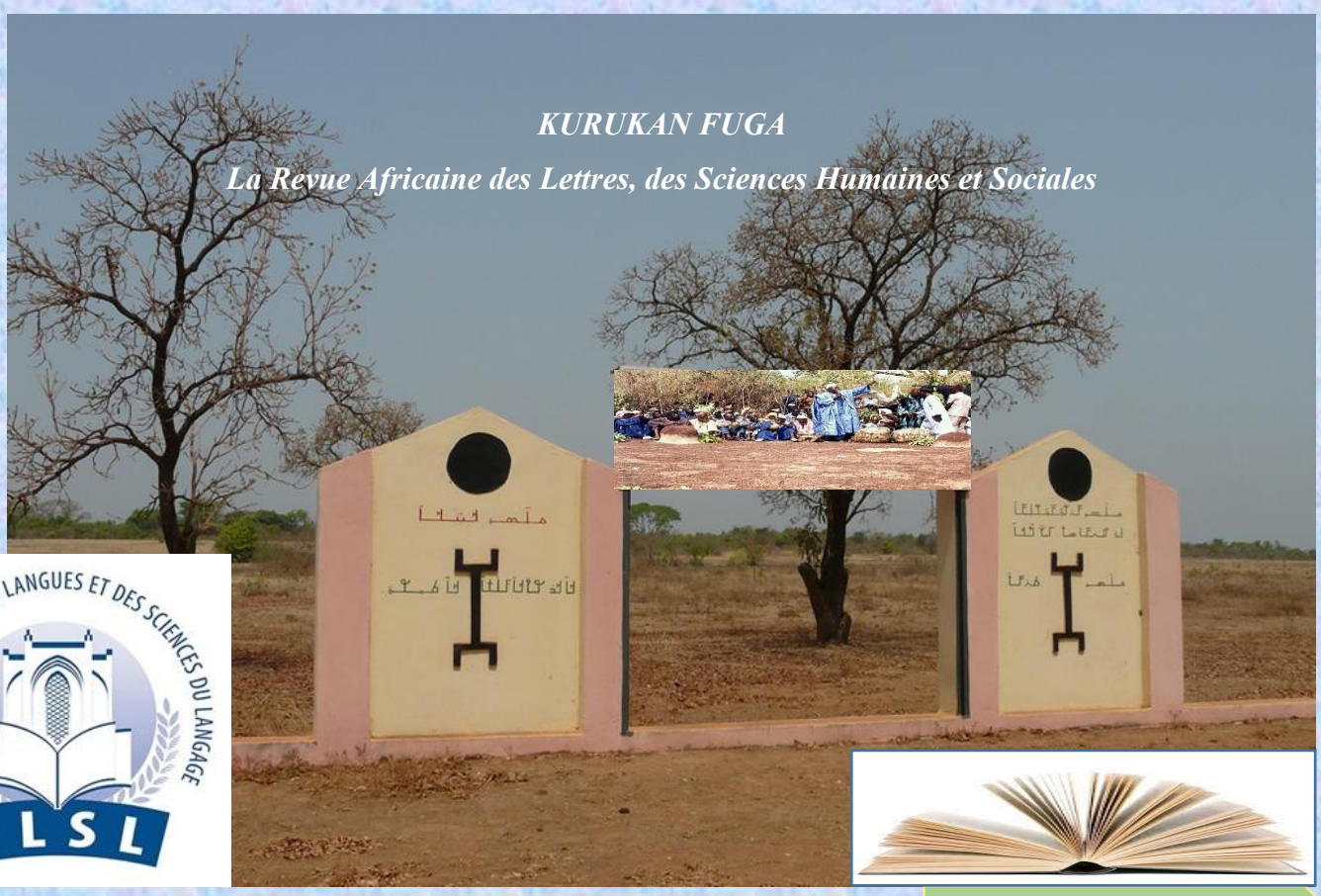

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La Revue Africaine des Lettres, des Sciences Humaines et Sociales ***KURUKAN FUGA***

FROM SLAVERY TO SHARECROPPING: A READING OF *THE THIRD LIFE OF GRANGE COPELAND* BY ALICE WALKER

Soungalo KONE: American Studies, U.Y.O.B. - Doctorant-
LABORATOIRE DE LANGUES, LITTERATURE ET SOCIETE : (LARELSO)
Email: soungalokone9@gmail.com

Dr. Sory DOUMBIA (Maître de Conference): American Studies, U.Y.O.B.
LABORATOIRE DE LANGUES, LITTERATURE ET SOCIETE : (LARELSO)
Email: bancosory@gmail.com

Abstract
This article studies: From Slavery to Sharecropping: A Reading of The Third Life of Grange Copeland by Alice Walker. It deals with two systems that African Americans experienced in America. None of these systems was appreciable. These systems were called slavery and sharecropping. Black history started in America in 1619 when about 20 Africans were deported to Jamestown, Virginia by a Dutch ship to reinforce labor force. In two or three decades, Black people were transformed into slaves. This transformation into slave made them suffer a lot. When slavery was abolished, the sharecropping system appeared. Since then former slaves did not possess land, most of them accepted the system thinking that it was a source of finding happiness. Unfortunately, a large number of Black sharecroppers were indebted making them living in deplorable conditions and turning their frustration to their women and children by mistreating them. The problematics of this study is that many people think that the abolition of slavery in America was the end of black predicaments. Thus, the main objective of this article is to demonstrate that the abolition of slavery was not the end of blacks' sufferings in American society. In doing so, the methodology adopted in this study is qualitative. To carry out this study, womanist theory has been used to scrutinize this study's findings. It is a theory that is like feminism and Afrocentricity. The results of the study permit readers to see that the ending of black enslavement did not mean a real freedom for them.

Key words: African American, Domestic violence, Sharecropping, Slavery, and Womanism.

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Résumé
Cet article porte sur: De l'esclavage à Sharecropping: Une lecture de The Third Life of Grange Copeland par Alice Walker. Il traite de deux systèmes que les Afro-Américains ont connus en Amérique. Aucun de ces systèmes n'était appréciable. Il s'agit d'esclavage et de métayage. L'histoire des Noirs a commencé en Amérique en 1619, lorsqu'une vingtaine d'Africains ont été transportés à Jamestown, en Virginie, pour renforcer la main-d'œuvre. En deux ou trois décennies, les Noirs ont été transformés en esclaves. Cette transformation en esclave en les causant beaucoup de souffrances. Lorsque l'esclavage fut aboli, le système du métayage apparut. Les

anciens esclaves ne possédaient pas de terre, donc la plupart d'entre eux acceptèrent le système pensant qu'il était une source de bonheur. Malheureusement, un grand nombre de métayers noirs étaient endettés, les faisant vivre dans des conditions déplorables et reportant leur frustration sur leurs femmes et leurs enfants en les maltraitant. La problématique de cette étude est que beaucoup de gens pensent que l'abolition de l'esclavage avait mis fin à la souffrance des Noirs. Ainsi, l'objectif principal de cet article est de démontrer que l'abolition de l'esclavage n'était pas la fin des souffrances des Noirs dans la société américaine. La méthodologie adoptée dans le cadre de cette étude est qualitative. Pour mener à bien cette étude, la théorie womaniste a été utilisée pour examiner les résultats de cette étude. C'est une théorie qui ressemble au féminisme et à l'afrocentricité. Les résultats de l'étude permettent aux lecteurs de comprendre que l'abolition de l'esclavage n'avait pas mis fin à la souffrance des noirs en Amérique.

Mots clés: Afro-Américains, Esclavage, Métayage, Womanisme, et Violence domestic.

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Introduction

This study investigates Blacks' predicaments' depiction in African-American literature. Indeed, slavery and sharecropping were unlikeable situations Blacks experienced in America. They were systems in which black people toiled, but did not gain any profit from their own labor. As a result, most of Black men turned their frustrations to their women and children by mistreating them. To Grange Copeland in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* by Alice Walker, in his stories, asserted that African Americans have their roots in Africa. Since he told his granddaughter Ruth that she had been stolen from Africa to America, this means that African Americans' ancestors were from Africa and most of them were stolen to America.

In addition to that, Conway (1968) revealed that the first Africans reached America via Virginia, Jamestown, in 1619. They were shipped to the New World to reinforce the labor force. At first, those enslaved Africans sent to the English colonies were considered as indentured servants. Indentured laborers were those who were brought to America and placed under contract to work for another person. Usually, they were not paid but exchange for free passage to the New World.

Two or three decades later, slavery had become as a racial caste with the transformation of Africans into slaves in America. They and their offspring became legally the property of their owners. They were not only regarded as property or commodity but also as units of labor. They were brought and sold at markets with other commodity and services. When this happened, it encouraged the transportation of Africans into the slave markets. Many farmers

increased the size of their plantations, and buying slaves from slave markets to their plantations to execute plantations' works.

The problematics of the study is to show that the abolition of enslavement in America did not bring really freedom to former slaves. Thus, the objective of this article is to account for that abolition of slavery was not the end of black's predicaments in American land. The system that replaced slavery was a new form of slavery. Then to conduct this study, womanism has been chosen in order to carry out the analyses and interpretations of the data. It is a theory that has been coined by Alice Walker in 1983. It invites black women to love each other to defend their cause and black men's one in society.

Structurally, the study is divided into two main parts. The first part accounts Blacks Under Slavery: A Tragic Experience. The second one deals with A New Form of Slavery: The Paradoxes of Sharecropping.

1. Blacks Under Slavery: A Tragic Experience

This part talks about Black predicaments. It deals with how African Americans or their ancestors left Africa to America, detailing the conditions in which they were shipped from the African continent to America, and ultimately disclosing what they experienced in their daily lives in American society.

1.1 Blacks from Africa to America

The Third Life of Grange Copeland reveals that African-American ancestors were from Africa. This is noted in Grange's speeches. One day, in his story telling, he told his granddaughter Ruth that she was stolen from Africa to America, in chains, for slavery. Here, Ruth represents Black Americans. This means a large number of African-Americans ancestors were forcibly shipped to America into slavery. Besides, Conway (1968) documented that the history of the Negro in America began in 1619. Before the end of the slave trade, millions of Africans were transported to the New World. He also mentioned that the first Africans to reach America were not considered as slaves. They were only regarded as bond servants or indentured laborers.

For the truthfulness of Grange Copeland story to his granddaughter Ruth, one can see Law (1989) and Tyner (2016) wrote that between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries,

probably between eleven and twelve million slaves were purchased in Africa by European and American traders. The sources of this enormous supply of slaves within African societies were various. Among the sources, there were the sale of existing domestic slaves, judicial enslavement of criminals, the seizure of insolvent debtors, and small-scale kidnapping. But it has been noted that most of those who had been exported were enslaved through capture in war. Slave traders realized that captives for the Atlantic trade were often enslaved deep in the African interior. To sell them, they had to be taken from their original place of capture over long distances to be sold at the coast, there, they were shipped to America.

Smallwood, (2008) and Johnson, (1999) wrote that on top of the slave trade in the United States, the slave was not acknowledged as a human being. The black people who were for sale, their images that stamped advertisements and pamphlets, that posed on auction blocks and were objectified by the gaze of the buyers, were not recognized to be that of mothers, fathers, or children. Instead, the slave was compared to market goods, an object of trade. For, slaves traders regarded slaves as commodities that could be sold to earn money. As for slave owners, they saw slaves as objects to be used to make profit. Moreover, slave holders also considered their slaves equally to properties and whenever they wanted, they could exchange them for money. Even many slave holders realized that it was more interesting to possess slaves than possessing lands. When someone decided to sell a piece of land, it could take time before being bought. However, if a slave was put for sale, directly a master bought him/her. To confirm the importance of possessing slaves, one reads in *Beloved* (1987) by Toni Morrison that when Mr. Garner died, his wife Mrs. Garner sold a slave to pay off her debts which covered the moment she was widowed.

The term commodification was used to demonstrate that the idea that to commodify was to recognize someone or something as a product that could be bought or sold. For slaves, the fact of regarding them like goods was caused by the removal of all human signifiers from them,

and comparing them with marketable products. Although numerous studies have focused on the slave as a commodity, it is noticed that less attention has been paid to the methods and conditions by which slaveholders and the slave market at large came to regard the slaves as commodities. By examining the deeper culture of slave commodification, it could be argued that the American slave markets allowed buyers and sellers to detach themselves from the immorality of the process, thus giving way for economic and social growth.

Tolman (2011) and Aiken (2008) revealed that slave families were generally separated when they were sold. The separation happened very often when a slave owner died or found himself or herself in economic trouble. They could also do it to have a good control over the slaves. Then, Tolman gave us an example of a terrible separation involving Maria Perkins, a slave who wrote a letter to her husband to show her sorrow about the destruction of their family:

> Dear Husband I write you a letter to let you know my distress my master has sold albert to a trader on Monday court day and the other child is for sale also (...) I want you to tell dr Hamelton and your master if either will buy me (...) I don't want a trader to get me they asked me if I had got any person to buy me and I told them no they took me to the court house too they never put me up a man buy the name of brady bought albert and is gone I don't know where they say he lives in Scottesvillle (...) Nothing more I am and ever will be your kind wife. (Tolman, AG: 8 Crossroads- March 2011).

This quotation also highlights how black people suffered from being sold during enslavement. They did not have human value in the eyes of slaveholders or slave traders but property or goods. It also determines the way blacks were treated or the status that given to blacks in society. In addition to that, blacks seemed to be invisible or voiceless. It was white people who determined what a black should do or should not do. In general, blacks were comparable with women in a patriarchal society. In a patriarchy society, men dictate women's roles. This is something womanists do not appreciate. For this reason, Walker always struggles to reposition or redefine women in her writings. That is why one can see, in most of her novels, at the beginning women characters accept their status, but toward the end of novels they challenge the traditional norms by doing things that women were not supposed to do.

The language used in this quotation is also shocking. It can make readers feel for the slaves, for it is morally unacceptable to see how this family members had been separated. When

one sits down and tries to look family ties, the relationship between a couple or father and children or mother and children, and to see in literary works that ties could be ended by selling away family members is really terrible. Slaves were subjected to unbearable conditions.

So, it can be affirmed that Slave marriages and family ties were not recognized by American law. For, slave owners had the right to sell husbands from wives, parents from children, and brothers from sisters. The sale of children from parents was even more common. Besides, Aiken (2008) documented that a slave couple could be owned by different owners and the father could visit his family only at his master's discretion. In this case, the master who owned the woman had the right to the children. Even this could be considered as slave breeding. For the progeny of the slave mother belong to her master. Many slave owners voluntarily came to regard slaves as a currency or as the ticket to their prosperity. Some slave holders did not regard this as racism, because it was in mind that blacks did not have human value.

1.2. Slave Life

Both Walker, and Lerner (1975) and Boucher (2010) asserted that field slaves underwent significant untold hardships in the hands of slaveholders or overseers. These field enslaved people were forced to do arduous labor in agricultural fields throughout the day. Their work commenced in the morning and continued into the afternoon, often extending into the evening hours. This pattern was characteristic of the majority of enslaved people employed on large plantations, encompassing individuals of all ages, including children as young as five or six and the elderly. In essence, these individuals laboured from dawn to dusk. Field hands constituted the fundamental workforce of the plantation economy, undertaking the most demanding agricultural tasks. These tasks were primarily associated with the cultivation of cotton, sugar, rice, and tobacco, and included activities such as clearing forests for new farmland, digging irrigation ditches, constructing dikes for rice production, hand-picking cotton from thorny bushes, and manually planting and harvesting sugarcane using machetes. Even after the daylight hours, their labour was not concluded; they were also responsible for organizing tools, caring for family members, and preparing meals before retiring for the night.

As for domestic slaves, these enslaved house servants were employed in both extensive rural plantation settings and large urban residences, as well as in urban establishments such as taverns and hotels. Their duties encompassed all aspects necessary for the operation of private or public households, which included not only indoor tasks but also the care of horses and carriages. The division of labor among servants was typically organized according to

assignments, with many enslaved individuals starting their careers as young apprentices and subsequently ascending the social hierarchy, often inheriting positions held by family members, all under the oversight of the female head of the household.

House servants could be male or female. Female slaves were in charge of cooking, cleaning, washing clothes, milking, sweeping, food service, and child's care. Concerning male slaves, they took care of horses; they drove the carriages, and kept the gardens. House slaves worked every single day; and they could be set to work at any time of day and night.

To womanist theory, slaves are compared to women, and slave holders represent men. For, slaves were dominated by their owners. Slave owners or overseers always told slaves what they should do and what they should not. Slaves could not define themselves; they were defined by their Masters. This was a domination, and such domination Beecher (1874) did not appreciate. As men exercised a domination over women by dictating women's roles in society, she asserted that men and women were equal by nature, but "culture" has differentiated male from female characteristics and duties. To Beecher, culture was the opposite of nature. Similar to slaves and slave holders, they all were human beings or they were born equal, but the society made them different. The next point deals with a new form of slavery: the paradoxes of sharecropping.

2. A New Form of Slavery: The Paradoxes of Sharecropping

This section is intended to show to the readers that sharecropping system which replaced the slavery was another form of slavery. It permitted plantation owners to continue exploiting black community. This exploitation negatively impacted black sharecroppers. It made them so poor and they return their frustration to the women and children.

2.1. Social Paradoxes of Sharecropping

After the Civil War, it has been noticed that civil rights and various economic and social barriers were devised to maintain a system whereby many blacks worked as farm operators with a limited and often total lack of opportunity to achieve ownership and operating independence. Farming as a family-owned and independent business has been an important part of the social and economic development of the United States. But for many black farmers, it was more often than not a losing struggle. The end of slavery was followed by racial discrimination in the South that limited opportunities for black farmers to acquire land or to succeed in life.

The sharecropping system was adopted because the Civil War had eventually made slavery illegal in the United States; therefore, landowners lost their slave workforce. Landowners had the land, but couldn't afford to hire workers to plant, care for, and harvest crops; as a result, the sharecropping system was adopted to fill that gap.

In this system, laborers worked land that belonged to someone else. Workers would plant and harvest the land. In return, the landowner would provide them with a home and the tools, animals, seeds, and other resources the sharecropper needed to work the land. The landowner extended credit to the sharecropper for the basic necessities of life. At harvest time, the sharecropper would usually receive half of the value of the crop but minus whatever was owed to the landowner.

One can probably already see what kinds of abuses this type of system would entail. The sharecroppers were dependent on the landowner and at the mercy of the weather. If there was drought, insect infestation, or flood that caused a loss or diminished crop, the sharecropper could fall further into debt to the landowner. If the landowner happened to be dishonest, the sharecropper would not make any profit. The landowner might even own a plantation store and require sharecroppers to shop in his store. Landowners could keep the sharecroppers in debt, and thereby control them. Sharecroppers had little hope of getting out of debt or earning enough money to buy their own farms and finally have true independence as landowners themselves.

A sharecropper did not own his own farm; nor did his own house, mule, or tools. Instead, he rented these from his landlord. The landlord allowed 'croppers' to farm his land, usually about 10 acres, in exchange for 1/3 of the crops. Since he owned the land, the landlord could order the type of crops to plant, usually cotton or tobacco, and could prevent "croppers" from planting vegetables, which they might eat or sell to overcome some financial problems. Croppers seldom made improvements on the farms, which they did not own, and landlords frequently let the farms, which they did not live on, fall into disrepair. With from 1/3 to 2/3rds of the crops going to the landlord, there was little incentive to work as hard as the business of farming required.

The preceding paragraphs can be interpreted as relationship or business existing between farmers and landlords was purely based on exploitation of farmers. Farmers were absolutely dominated under this relationship or business. The landlord ordered everything. It was up to him to decide the type of the plant the farmer should plant, and he also recommended the date of planting. The landlord made every decision. This was a domination. Womanists refused to

accept such given position. They fought their men against such attitudes towards them in order to affirm their existence. This business system linked landlords with farmers as a husband and his wife. Generally, the husband dominated his wife and dictated to her what she should do without consulting her to know her mind about the point. The woman's role was to execute what has been told her by her husband. In this context of sharecropping system, Whites played the role of men and black farmers played the role of women. The following part discusses family paradoxes.

2.2. Family Paradoxes

Sharecropping system was not far from slavery institution. It made a number of black farmers miserable. Consequently, they turned their frustration on their wives. One can see Grange's miserableness drove him to start drinking and regularly fighting with his wife. Whenever they fought, the house became quiet. With this experience Walker (1970) writes:

> On Monday, suffering from a hangover and the aftereffects of a violent quarrel with his wife the night before, Grange was morose, sullen, reserved, deeply in pain under the hot early morning sun. Margaret was tense and hard, exceedingly nervous. Brownfield moved about the house like a mouse. (pp.11-12)

Their domestic violence was due to the economic enslavement. This enslavement was caused by the economic system which drove black farmers into poverty. It can be safe to declare that the system was deliberately organized to keep black race at the bottom of the social ladder. Moreover, he became unfaithful toward his wife, Margaret also decided to revenge herself on him by bedding down with Grange's Master, Mr. Shipley. As a result, she gave birth to a white baby who was named Star. This action shocked Grange so much. Being unable to bear this situation added to his failure in sharecropping system. Thus, Grange decided to run away from his family to the North. After the running of Grange, she could not bear to live without him. Less than a month later, she poisoned her baby Star to death and committed a suicide; no doubt, it was clear the poverty was the main cause of their misunderstanding or what occurred.

This narrative can be interpreted that generally the poverty that black farmers experienced in the system was the origin of infidelity, making black men and women cheat on one another. This often caused the destruction of families. Because of the infidelity, men ran away from their families to avoid killing their wives. As for women, they hated children that they gave birth to, but were not the blood of their husbands. Consequently, they poisoned such children and

committed suicide. The writer took the example on Grange Copeland to reveal that such actions were frequent in the world of sharecroppers.

As for Brownfield, the son of Grange Copeland, when he married Mem, he called her honey. He entered the sharecropping system and became poorer than his father. Besides, during the Christmas, he could not afford clothes for his children nor his wife because of his economy conditions. For, the system was mostly favourable to the side of landowners and not to the side of farmers. In the end, he turned his frustration on his wife. He got involved in drinking. Then, their relation as husband and wife was getting worse and worse. Brownfield started lying to her, accusing her of things she had never done. He lied that she was unfaithful to him, that she let herself be used by his oppressors (whites).

The description of Brownfield attitudes towards his wife demonstrates black men brutality or wickedness against black women. They constantly abused their women, showing their manhood or strength; however, they were weak before white people. This description first contains black men's weakness and secondly implies that black women received the result of suffering or oppression which Black men experienced from White people's attitudes toward them. As Black men were dominated, oppressed, and ill-treated by Whites, they got their satisfaction by demonstrating their masculinity or strength to their women.

Brownfield and his wife's marriage ended up in a killing. He shot Mem dead because she became skinny, leaving the three daughters motherless (orphans of mother). Here this killing highlights Black men criminality. Walker used this language "killing" to show that Black men were criminal, violent, wicked, savage etc.

After the killing, Ruth went to live with her paternal grandfather (Grange), and Mem father took Daphne and Ornette to North. Brownfield was sent to prison and sentenced to ten years. Brownfield was paroled after he served seven years in prison. When he left prison, he wanted to take away his daughter Ruth from his father Grange. Grange also did not have any will to give the girl to her father to raise; furthermore, Ruth despised her father because he killed her mother.

Brownfield conspired with a judge to sue his father in court. In the court, Ruth clearly told them that she wanted to stay with her grandfather. Even the judge did not give floor to Grange. Although Ruth refused to leave her grandfather, Harry (judge) pronounced that Brownfield had got the right to take care of his child and headed to the door. In court Grange gunned dead Brownfield and ran home with Ruth. He was pursued and shot dead by police too.

This is the paint of the realities African Americans experienced in America. They were not considered and did not have any protection.

Conclusion

In sum, this study has presented that African Americans have their roots in Africa. Most of their ancestors had been deported from Africa to America during the Atlantic slave trade. At first, they were not slaves but indentured laborers. After two or three decades, they were transformed into slaves. This transformation motivated the transportation of Africans to America. In American land, these deported Africans were regarded as properties or commodities. When this slavery had been abolished, plantations' owners found another way that permitted to continue exploiting ex slaves. This system was known under the name of sharecropping. It was a new form of slavery. Most black farmers were indebted under system making them illtreat their wives and children. This means that abolition of slavery did not bring real peace to black people in American society, but made them keep suffering.

As recommendation, it is clear that African Americans continue to fight for racial equality in American society; but it is interesting for American government to take its responsibilities for racial equality in society. It has to watch over the implementation of anti-racial laws; whosoever transgresses one of these laws must be punished according to the law.

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