

Vol. 5, N°19, pp. 68– 83, Septembre 2026
 Copy©right 2024 / licensed under CC BY 4.0
 Author(s) retain the copyright of this article
 ISSN : 1987-1465
 DOI : <https://www.doi.org/10.62197/HCPM9460>
Indexation : Copernicus, CrossRef, Mir@bel, Sudoc,
 ASCI, Zenodo
 Email : RevueKurukanFuga2021@gmail.com
 Site : <https://revue-kurukanfuga.net>

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

PATRIARCHAL ANXIETY AND THE BROKEN PROVIDER: A FANONIAN–WOMANIST READING OF WALKER’S *THE THIRD LIFE OF GRANGE COPELAND*

Sitan DIAKITE

Lecturer

Department of English

Yambo Ouologuem University, Bamako, Mali

Email: diakitan@yahoo.fr

Abstract: This paper analyzes patriarchal anxiety and the broken provider in Walker’s *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* from a Fanonian–Womanist perspective. In Alice Walker’s *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970), White landowners and the racist social system exploit Black sharecroppers through poverty, discrimination, and violence. This oppression limits opportunities and creates hardship for Black families, particularly wives. The interconnection between patriarchal embodiment and racial supremacy interference, contribute to the suffering of male providers that causes violence and worsen married couple’ relationships. The objective of this study is to examine how the sharecropping system of the American South produces in Grange and Brownfield Copeland a patriarchal anxiety that systematically annihilates matrimonial complementarity – and to what extent Grange’s “third life” offers a redemptive redefinition of black masculinity grounded in accountability rather than economic provision. This paper adopts a qualitative approach grounded in close reading of the central text and verified theoretical sources. The theoretical frame refers to Frantz Fanon’s (1963) in colonial psychopathology and Alice Walker (1983) Womanist framework as developed by bell hooks (1984) and Patricia Hill Collins (2000). The findings reveal that domestic violence in the novel functions as structurally patriarchal and racially displaced aggression, that matrimonial complementarity is actively shattered rather than merely absent. Grange’s redemption, although sincere, but still remains partial. The living together should be seen as an opportunity of overcoming difficulties than the contrary.

Keywords: Afro-American Littérature, Anxiety, Complementarity, Matrimonial, Patriarchal domination, Racial Exploitation.

Résumé: Cet article analyse l’anxiété patriarcale et la figure du pourvoyeur défaillant dans *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* de Walker, dans une perspective fanonienne-womaniste. Dans *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970) d’Alice Walker, les propriétaires terriens blancs et le système social raciste exploitent les métayers noirs à travers la pauvreté, la discrimination et la violence. Cette oppression limite les possibilités qui s’offrent à eux et engendre de nombreuses difficultés pour les familles noires, en particulier les épouses. L’interconnexion entre les effets du patriarcat et l’interférence de la suprématie raciale contribue aux souffrances des hommes, contraints d’assurer le rôle de pourvoyeurs, ce qui entraîne la violence et détériore les relations entre mari et femme. L’objectif de cette étude est d’examiner comment le système du métayage dans le Sud-Américain engendre, chez Grange et Brownfield Copeland, une anxiété patriarcale qui anéantit systématiquement la complémentarité matrimoniale - et dans quelle mesure la « troisième vie » de Grange propose une redéfinition rédemptrice de la masculinité noire fondée sur la responsabilité plutôt que sur la capacité économique à pourvoir aux

besoins du foyer. Cet article adopte une approche qualitative fondée sur une lecture rapprochée du texte principal et de sources théoriques vérifiées. Le cadre théorique s'appuie sur la psychopathologie coloniale de Frantz Fanon (1963) et le cadre womaniste d'Alice Walker (1983), tel que développé par bell hooks (1984) et Patricia Hill Collins (2000). Les résultats révèlent que la violence domestique dans le roman fonctionne comme une agression racialement et socialement déplacée, que la complémentarité matrimoniale est activement détruite plutôt que simplement absente. La rédemption de Grange, bien que sincère, demeure toujours partielle. Le vivre ensemble doit être une opportunité de surmonter les difficultés et non le contraire.

Mots-clés: anxiété, complémentarité, domination patriarcale, Littérature Afro-Américaine, matrimoniale, raciale exploitation.

Introduction

The question of the broken patriarch runs through Alice Walker's (1970) work like an open wound. In *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970), her debut novel, Walker dissects with clinical precision the damage that the Southern sharecropping system inflicts not only on the Black men it exploits, but on the women and children who share their domestic space. Grange Copeland, the novel's central figure, embodies what this article calls the "broken provider". He is the husband and father whose structural incapacity prevents him to fulfill the economic role patriarchal society assigns him. That failure generates in him an anxiety so consuming that it destroys every possibility of matrimonial complementarity. The novel thus raises a question of enduring urgency: to what extent does racial and economic oppression make, within the intimate space of the home, abusers out of the abused?

The significance of this subject lies in Walker's (1970) refusal of simplistic readings. She offers neither monsters nor saints, but human beings caught inside structures that exceed them - and for whom, she insists, moral responsibility remains nonetheless. To examine patriarchal anxiety as a mechanism for the destruction of conjugal complementarity is to analyze a phenomenon that connects the macro-political to the micro-intimate: the plantation ledger and the battered face, the white landowner's truck and the silence that follows it home every Saturday night.

These novel demands that both registers be read simultaneously.

Walker (1970) scholarship has engaged extensively with the themes of domestic violence and racial oppression in this novel, most notably through the work of Trudier Harris (1982) and Deborah McDowell (1980). Patricia Hill Collins (2000), in *Black Feminist Thought*, has established that Black women's experiences operate at the intersection of race, class, and gender - what she terms a matrix of domination - providing an essential framework for reading Margaret and Mem's suffering as structurally produced rather than incidental. Postcolonial scholarship, drawing on Frantz Fanon's insights into spatial and systemic subjugation, has

increasingly analyzed the structural mechanics of the Jim Crow South as an internal colonial space (Rabaka, 2010). Yet few studies have systematically articulated both frameworks to analyze the specific deterioration of matrimonial complementarity as the direct consequence of patriarchal anxiety in Walker's (1970) fiction. This article addresses that gap by asking the question these frameworks, taken separately, have left unanswered:

How does the racial and economic system of sharecropping produce, in Grange and Brownfield Copeland, a patriarchal anxiety that renders conjugal complementarity impossible and to what extent does Grange's "third life" propose a redemptive redefinition of protection and Black masculinity?

This article pursues three objectives:

- first, to analyze the socio-economic mechanisms that transform the provider into a broken figure;
- second, to examine how that fracture contributes to affect couple life conjugal solidarity and converts the home into a battleground;
- and third, to interrogate the scope and limits of Grange's redemption as an alternative model of protective masculinity.

Two theories serve as analytical lenses for this study. The first is Frantz Fanon's (1963) **colonial psychopathology**, as developed in *The Wretched of the Earth*, where he argues that "the colonized subject will first train this aggressiveness sedimented in his muscles against his own people" (p. 64). This framework illuminates the domestic violence of Grange and Brownfield as racially displaced aggression - rage that cannot reach its true target and is redirected onto the nearest available bodies. The second lens is **Womanism**, theorized by Walker (1983) herself and developed analytically by bell hooks (1984) in *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, where hooks, reflecting on the consciousness forged by marginalization, writes that those living on the edge "developed a particular way of seeing reality" - looking "both from the outside in and from the inside out." Applied to this novel, this oppositional worldview centers the experiences of Margaret, Mem, and Ruth not as margins of the narrative but as its moral core. Together, these two frameworks allow us to argue that Walker's novel functions simultaneously as a diagnosis and a prescription: Fanon (1963) explains how the system breaks men, and womanism illuminates what survival, accountability, and repair might look like in its aftermath. This paper calls on a qualitative approach grounded in close reading of Walker's (1970) text, supplemented by the theoretical frameworks outlined above. The analysis follows a three-stage roadmap corresponding to the three sections of this article: the anatomy of the broken provider, the collapse of the matrimonial complementarity, and the redemptive redefinition of protection.

1- Anatomy of the “Broken Provider”

There is a particular kind of violence that does not announce itself with a raised fist. It seeps viciously through the unpaid bill, the averted gaze at the white man's truck, the empty pocket at the end of a week of labor that has produced nothing a man can call his own. In *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970), Alice Walker anatomizes this violence with the precision of a surgeon and the grief of a witness. What she recounts is not simply poverty but what we might call a socio-economic castration: the systematic dismantling of a man's sense of worth through the denial of economic agency, and the way that dismantling ricochets through domestic space and lands, with full force, on the bodies of Black women and children. From the opening chapters, the novel insists that the plantation system did not merely impoverish Black men - it restructured their relationship to selfhood, to family, and to power in ways that long outlasted the fields themselves.

The weekly cycle that governs the Copeland household makes this structural logic visible with devastating clarity. Walker (1970) describes it in terms that are almost clinical in their rhythm:

Their life followed a kind of cycle that depended almost totally on Grange's moods. 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 (p. 18).

What follows - Wednesday's barely suppressed despair, Thursday's grimacing deference before the truck driver, Saturday's explosion of whiskey and shotgun fire - is not random. The cycle maps almost perfectly onto the rhythms of sharecropping labor and the weekly moment of reckoning at the truck, when a family of five or six workers held their breath wondering if they would take home, together, a whole dollar. Grange has internalized the plantation's calendar so completely that his family can predict his emotional state by the day of the week. His inner life has been colonized by the system that exploits his labor.

This is what scholars of Black masculinity under racial capitalism have long recognized as the central trap: the man who cannot direct his anger at the structure that crushes him tends to redirect it toward those who cannot defend themselves. As bell hooks (2004) argues in *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity*, “we can break the life threatening choke-hold patriarchal masculinity imposes on Black men and create life sustaining visions of a reconstructed black masculinity” (p. xii) - but only by first naming what that choke-hold is and who tightens it. hooks's (2004) formulation maps precisely onto Grange's predicament: he has absorbed the

dominant culture's equation between manhood and economic provision, and that equation is a contract the South has no intention of honoring with him. The result is a man whose patriarchal anxiety is entirely legible - and entirely destructive.

Walker makes the mechanism of this destruction unforgettable in the scene at the cotton truck, witnessed through Brownfield's child's eyes. When Mr. Shipley arrives to collect the week's cotton, Grange does not confront, does not protest. His face freezes into "an unnaturally bland mask," and he becomes, in his son's horrified perception, something that "moved in tense jerks if it moved at all." The mask Grange wears before the white landowner is not weakness - it is survival. But survival has a price. The energy required to suppress his rage before Shipley must go somewhere, and by Saturday night it comes home, transformed into alcohol and threat, driving Margaret and Brownfield into the woods. The domestic space becomes the site where what cannot be said in the field is finally, catastrophically, expressed.

Walker (1970) develops this logic most explicitly through the parallel figure of Brownfield, who repeats his father's pattern with his wife Mem. In a passage that functions as the novel's clearest theoretical statement, she writes:

He was expected to raise himself up on air, which was all that was left over after his work for others [...] His crushed pride, his battered ego, made him drag Mem away from schoolteaching [...] 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 (p. 61).

This is Walker's (1970) most precise account of the broken provider. Brownfield cannot build on air - on the nothing the system leaves him. He drags Mem away from teaching not out of malice alone but because her competence exposes his inadequacy. She knows what he does not. She can do what he cannot. In a world, that has already measured him and found him wanting, he cannot endure a mirror that makes him look smaller still.

This insight - that patriarchal domestic violence is often displaced class and racial violence - is not unique to Walker (1970). As Fanon (1963) observes in *The Wretched of the Earth*,

whereas the colonist or police officer can beat the colonized subject day in and day out, insult him and shove him to his knees, it is not uncommon to see the colonized subject draw his knife at the slightest hostile or aggressive look from another colonized subject (p. 61).

Walker (1970) translates this political insight into domestic anatomy: the man who cannot strike upward strikes sideways, casting his wife as the available body onto which humiliation is transferred and inscribed. Grange cannot draw his knife before Shipley. He draws it, metaphorically and literally, before Margaret. Walker refuses, crucially, to let this function as an excuse.

For the distinction the novel draws from its earliest pages is between explanation and exoneration. Grange is not rendered as a monster but as a product - one the novel insists we understand in full. His face carries “a dispassionate vacancy and sadness, as if a great fire had been extinguished within him and was just recently missed” (Walker, *The third life of Grange Copeland*, 1970, p. 19). This image of the extinguished fire is Walker's (1970) most economical statement of what sharecropping has done to Grange Copeland. It did not make him evil. It put out the light.

The absence of that light does not excuse what Walker (1970) calls “the fatal shrug”. The fatal shrug is the gesture by which Grange surveys the leaking roof. It also refers to the unreachable school, the dress Margaret needs and cannot have, and simply drops his shoulders. “After each shrug,” Walker (1970) writes, “he was more silent than before, as if each of these shrugs cut him off from one more topic of conversation” (p. 20). The shrug is not merely defeat. It is abandonment - of Margaret, of Brownfield, of the family's possibility. Grange's “fatal shrug” is not merely defeat - it is abandonment, a daily, incremental renunciation of the relational obligations of fatherhood and partnership, dressed in the language of helplessness. As Collins (2000) argues in *Black Feminist Thought*, the matrix of domination operates across “structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal domains of power” that “reappear across quite different forms of oppression” (p. 35). Applied to the Copeland household, this framework reveals that Grange's silence and withdrawal are not simply personal failures but interpersonal expressions of a structural condition - the domination he absorbs in the field is reproduced, in a different register, through the power he withholds and the presence he denies his family.

What *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970) insists upon, with the moral seriousness that defines Walker's (1970) best work, is that structural oppression and personal responsibility are not mutually exclusive categories. The system that made Grange a broken provider is real, historically documented, and morally indictable. The damage he inflicts on Margaret - and that Brownfield will go on to inflict on Mem - is equally real. The novel's power lies precisely in its refusal to choose between these truths. It holds both simultaneously, under sustained pressure, and asks the reader to do the same. That double holding is uncomfortable. It is also the only honest way to look at what the plantation system produced in the intimate spaces of Black family life - not just poverty, but a particular deformation of the self that expressed itself, over and over, on the bodies of Black women.

2-Collapse of Complementarity

If the first section established how the plantation economy broke the Black male provider from the outside, the second must confront what that breakage did on the inside - inside the marriage,

inside the home, inside the body of the woman who shared it. For what *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970) traces with such unflinching patience is not only the anatomy of the broken man but the systematic destruction of what a marriage could have been. Walker (1970) deliberately gives us a glimpse of that possibility before dismantling it - and it is precisely because we see what existed before that the collapse registers as tragedy rather than mere squalor.

The early pages of Brownfield and Mem's union carry a tenderness that Walker renders without irony. Three years into marriage, deep in debt and already shadowed by sharecropping bondage, Brownfield could nonetheless look back on his wedding day as the pinnacle of his achievement. Mem, Walker (1970) tells us,

was the kind of woman who sang while she cooked breakfast in the morning and sang when getting ready for bed at night. And sang when she nursed her babies, and sang to him when he crawled in weariness and dejection into the warm life-giving circle of her breast (p. 58).

This image of mutual sustenance - the man crawling wounded from the field into the warmth his wife offers, and being restored - is Walker's (1970) portrait of what matrimonial complementarity can look like. It is not idealized. It is rooted in exhaustion and debt. But within that shadow, something real and reciprocal breathes. Two people are answering each other's needs.

What makes this early tenderness so devastating is that Walker insists it was not illusion. The complementarity was genuine. Its destruction is therefore not the revelation of something that was never there - it is the murder of something that was. This distinction matters enormously. Brownfield and Mem begin their marriage with the capacity to hold their differences - her education, his rawness - within a shared project of survival and love. What the system does, gradually and relentlessly, is to make those very differences intolerable to Brownfield, because the system has already made him intolerable to himself.

The mechanism of this destruction is rendered by Walker (1970) with clinical precision. Unable to build on the emptiness the sharecropping economy leaves him, Brownfield turns his self-contempt outward and makes Mem its target. The first casualty is not her body but her voice. Walker (1970) writes: "The tender woman he married he set out to destroy. And before he destroyed her he was determined to change her. He succeeded in changing her. He was her Pygmalion in reverse" (p. 62). Language becomes the opening battleground. Mem is educated; she corrects Brownfield's grammar gently, as a partner would. He cannot bear it - he could not stand to be corrected at home after spending his days responding to white authority from a

stooped position. Mem's speech, that is the very instrument of her dignity and competence, becomes the first thing he systematically dismantles. Silencing Mem is also a way of suppressing her voice, then her power, to maintain her weak and inferior to him. It is Walker's attempt to raise awareness of how men silence women.

This inversion of the Pygmalion myth is one of Walker's (1970) most precise literary formulations. Where the mythological sculptor elevates a woman toward perfection, Brownfield sculpts Mem relentlessly downward - toward silence, toward ugliness, toward the haggard exhaustion that will eventually render her unrecognizable as the woman he married. The domestic space has ceased to function as a site of complementarity and has become a site of deliberate diminishment. Walker stages this process in the Saturday night beatings with a directness that refuses the comfort of metaphor. She depicts:

Over the years they reached, what they would have called when they were married, an impossible, and unbelievable decline. 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 (p. 62).

The phrase "imprinting it on her face" is one of the most morally precise in the novel. The face is where identity lives - where one is recognized, seen, known. To imprint his failure on Mem's face is to replace her selfhood with his shame, to make her body the archive of his defeat. This is not incidental violence; it is a calculated, if unconscious, act of substitution. Brownfield cannot reach the white landowner, the debt collector, the system that left him with nothing. He reaches Mem instead. As Fanon (1963) observes "the colonized subject will first train this aggressiveness sedimented in his muscles against his own people. This is the period when black turns on black" (p. 64). Fanon's (1963) formulation, though directed at collective political violence, illuminates the domestic dynamic with uncomfortable precision. The aggression Brownfield cannot discharge upward, is discharged inward - into the household, onto the woman nearest him.

What Walker (1970) also makes visible is the way this violence constitutes a form of captivity for Mem - one that operates without visible bars. Judith Herman (1997), in *Trauma and Recovery*, articulates this dynamic with clarity: "a man's home is his castle; rarely is it understood that the same home may be a prison for women and children. Women are rendered captive by economic, social, psychological, and legal subordination, as well as by physical force" (p. 89). Mem cannot simply leave. She has children, no income of her own, and no social infrastructure to receive her. Her captivity is invisible to the outside world and total in its effects. Mem is beaten each Saturday night. She is humiliated in public for her clear speech. She is above all forced to move from shack to shack at Brownfield's demand. These are not isolated

incidents but the interlocking bars of a domestic prison that the novel forces the reader to see clearly.

Brownfield Copeland experienced himself and through his father the human exploitation plot through his father's working and living conditions. The system remained such rooted and resilient that all his estimated plans and efforts seemed to be doomed to failure.

The newly married lived their life with joy and happiness as long as possible, before being caught as quick as possible by the trap of the capitalist system, through the instauration of salary payment as mood of compensation for an executed labor, after having three children to nourish. Despite the challenges, he could yet expect on his educated and schoolteacher as wife to face the situation if he was a bit flexible on his embodied gendered principles. Unfortunately, it rather occurs all the contrary, as reported by the writer, Walker (1970):

Others who were always within their rights to pay him practically nothing for his labor. He was never able to do more than exist on air; he was never able to build on it, and was never to have any land of his own; and was never able to set his woman up in style, which more than anything else he wanted to do. (p.53)

Unlike the husband, whose labor's yield rather benefits more the landowner than his family by the indebtedness system, the narratives describe the wife's initiatives, aiming at covering what the companion failed to take into charge for the family well-being. At the end of the day, all the projects fail through, because of the partner's sexist behaviors; that is to appropriate all his spouse's savings whenever she leaves something asides. Saving every cent she was allowed to keep from her wages as a schoolteacher or as a domestic for the purpose of buying a house someday, aims at avoiding:

Being forced to move from one sharecropper's cabin to another, with the arrogance of the white men, who put them out, for one reason or another, without warning or explanation. It is also to avoid each time stepping into a new place, with its new, and usually bigger rat holes, and saving her time and energy from cleaning cow manure out of a room to make it habitable for her children (P.53)

Despite the necessity of having an additional revenue in their situation, Brownfield's manhood's ego cannot allow him to maintain his wife as a schoolteacher. 'Her knowledge reflected badly on a husband who could scarcely read and write'. His need to bring her down to his level rather pushed him to send her into the white homes as a domestic.' (PP. 44-53). He is conscious of race humiliation by the economic hardship living condition, but he would prefer to perish in their hands than being rescue by his wife, to attribute all this triumph to her gender.

Although their condition has changed living in a new place on the insistence of Mem, his maleness behaviors' manifestation weakened her with pregnancies and prevented her to be accepted as a mere maid in their oppressors' house finally :

At the new house, there was a feeling of progress. An indoor toilet with a white tub, a face bowl, mirror and white commode. Now he could shit, and rising, look at himself, at the way his eyes had cleared themselves of the hateful veins and yellow tigerish lines, without much odor or rain, and much like a gentleman; or, as he invariably thought of it, like a white man. For there were electric lights, and he was sometimes moved to read. He woke in the mornings now to the warmth of an almost noiseless gas heater; and the refrigerator, although not new by some years, had nothing to do with melted ice or spoiled food. (P.94)

Having the right to enjoy the same living conditions as all other modern human beings thanks to his wife, is another of her triumphs, earning her power over him. She proved herself smarter, more resourceful than him in addition to her social background and level of education. He begins to complain about everything often and loudly, secretly savoring thoughts of how his wife would “come down” with the plot of pregnancy’ (p.95). For the children and her own expenses related to their illnesses, she could not honor the payment of the bills. He made it another better argument to comfort his position. He is working and making money, but he spent two months without paying the rent. He is not ready to pay anything as long as Mem substitutes herself at his place by signing the lease. She has better to continue paying in the same way if she wants to keep the house. This lack of respect toward him, makes him disengage his responsibility. Beyond all other discussions, he chooses to move them back to the old place rather than compromising his manhood pride, even if he himself acknowledges the worse condition. This demonstrates how resilient patriarchy was in obstructing the perspective of gender equity.

Mr. J. L.'s house was still half full of wet hay. There were no panes in the windows, only wooden shutters. Rain poured into all three of the small rooms, and there was no real floor, only tin, like old roofing, spread out to keep the bottom of the hay bales from getting soggy.

The instrumentalization of the female body is most strikingly illustrated in Brownfield's procreative strategy, through which he turns motherhood into a weapon of domination. Far from incidental, his repeated impregnations are carefully calculated as described in the novel: “Planting a seed to grow that would bring her down in weakness and dependence and to her ultimate destruction” (Walker, 1970, p. 105). Mem's body thus becomes the battleground on which the marital power struggle is waged; each forced pregnancy undermines her health a little

further and impedes the independence she had painstakingly won through paid work. This physical weakening achieves its aim when illness costs her the job that was her last bulwark of financial autonomy. Walker (1970) depicts:

what a sly and triumphant joy he felt when she could no longer keep her job. She was ill; the two pregnancies he forced on her in the new house, although they did not bear live fruit, almost completely destroyed what was left of her health” (p. 106).

Brownfield's sly joy reveals that her downfall is no accident but the payoff of a patiently matured plan. Rendered dependent once more, Mem falls back under the exclusive authority of a husband who tolerates no sharing of domestic power - matrimonial complementarity closes around her like a trap.

The kitchen scene, where lamplight encircles Mem and her children over the Sears Roebuck catalogue, crystallizes what has been lost with particular poignancy. In that brief moment - children pointing at bathtubs and electric lights, Mem laughing at her daughter's wide eyes - a version of warmth and possibility survives, fragile and self-contained. But the moment Brownfield enters, the lamp flickers and almost goes out. Walker (1970) does not belabor the symbolism. She doesn't need to. The man's arrival is atmospherically sufficient to extinguish what the woman has carefully made. As bell hooks (2010) reminds us in *Teaching Critical Thinking*, systems of domination operate most insidiously when they reach into the intimate spaces of daily life - when the home itself becomes “a tool of colonization,” and independent selfhood is suppressed not by force alone but by the accumulated weight of obedience demanded and dignity denied.

What *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970) ultimately argues, through the parallel destructions of Margaret and Mem, is that matrimonial complementarity is not simply a private matter between two individuals. It is a social possibility - one that requires conditions of dignity, economic sufficiency, and mutual legibility to survive. When those conditions are systematically denied by a racial order that empties Black men of agency and self-worth, the marriage becomes the site where that emptiness is filled with violence. Walker (1970) does not excuse this. She does not ask us to look away. She asks us to look straight at it - at Mem's battered face, at Margaret's desperate flight into strangers' arms, at the lamp that almost goes out - and to understand that what we are seeing is not private failure but the domestic face of a public crime.

3-The Responsible Patriarch

The first two lives of Grange Copeland are in essence variations on the same catastrophe. In his first life, he is the sharecropper who empties himself into whiskey and silence. He abandons

Margaret to her ruin, and flees to north carrying nothing but the system's damage. Grange's second life is marked by his years in New York, his return and marriage to Josie. The period corresponds to his reconstruction. The consciousness only occurred when he mentally and economically became stable. Walker builds the novel's redemptive arc not only around innocence recovered, but also around accountability claimed. The distinction makes Grange Copeland one of the most morally complex figures in African American fiction.

The instrument of Grange's transformation is Ruth, his granddaughter, whom he takes in after Brownfield murders Mem. The relationship between the old man and the child is the novel's emotional center, and Walker (1970) renders it with a tenderness that deliberately contrasts with everything that has come before. Ruth observes of her grandfather that "his crimes were never aimed at anyone but himself, and his total triumph over his life's failures was the joy in him that drew her to him" (Walker, *The third life of Grange Copeland*, 1970, p. 137). This short but dense sentence is Walker's (1970) summary of what Grange's third life represents: not the erasure of his crimes, but their reorientation. The man who once turned his failures outward - onto Margaret, onto the household, onto Brownfield and whoever was nearest - has learned, painfully and late, to carry them inward. His joy is inseparable from his grief. His tenderness toward Ruth is purchased with the full knowledge of what he failed to offer Margaret and Brownfield.

What this means structurally is that Grange's redemption is not sentimental. Walker (1970) refuses to launder him. He is still capable of cruelty, still prone to drink, still marked by the decades of deformation the system has worked on him. But something has shifted at the level of moral orientation. He can now see the difference between the system's violence and his own choices within it - and he refuses, crucially, to collapse that distinction. This refusal is the heart of his long speech to Ruth and Brownfield, one of the novel's most extraordinary passages:

By George, I know the danger of putting all the blame on somebody else for the mess you make out of your life. I fell into the trap myself! [...] 'Cause when they got you thinking that they're to blame for everything they have you thinking they's some kind of gods! You can't do nothing wrong without them being behind it. You gits just as weak as water, no feeling of doing nothing yourself. Then you begins to think up evil and begins to destroy everybody around you, and you blames it on the crackers (Walker, *The third life of Grange Copeland*, 1970, p. 200).

This is not a repudiation of structural analysis. Grange has lived that structure in his own body; he knows what the sharecropping economy did to him. But he has arrived at something Walker (1970) regards as essential: the understanding that structural victimization and personal responsibility are not mutually exclusive, and that collapsing them - using one to swallow the other - is itself a form of surrender to the oppressor's logic. To make the white man responsible

for everything is, paradoxically, to grant him the very omnipotence that crushes you. Grange's insight is that the oppressed man retains a self, and that self carries obligations - to his wife, to his children, to his own soul.

Walker (1970) deepens this insight through Grange's devastating self-indictment on the question of Margaret:

the crackers could make me run away from my wife, but where was the man in me that let me sneak off, never telling her nothing about where I was going, never telling her I forgave her, never telling her how wrong I was myself?" (Walker, *The third life of Grange Copeland*, 1970, p. 201).

The question - where was the man in me - is the question that Section I's broken provider could never ask. To ask it requires a conception of manhood that is not exhausted by economic provision, that survives the failure to earn and produce, that locates its foundation somewhere the sharecropping system cannot reach. It is precisely this alternative conception of manhood that Grange's third life embodies.

As bell hooks (1984) argues "Black men may be victimized by racism, but sexism allows them to act as exploiters and oppressors of women" (p. 15). This formulation captures exactly the double structure Walker (1970) has been anatomizing across the novel. Grange's third life represents the moment when a man raised inside that double structure manages, through suffering and loss, to refuse it. He cannot undo what he has done to Margaret. He cannot restore what Brownfield has taken from Mem. But he can choose, with Ruth, a different form of presence - one organized around protection, education, and love rather than around the redistribution of his own humiliation.

The education Grange gives Ruth is itself a redefinition of what it means to protect someone. He teaches her Black history, tells her about the sea and the slave ships, explains the mechanics of white supremacy - not to paralyze her but to arm her. He teaches her to shoot. He teaches her to make wine. He dances with her. He builds her a playhouse with his own hands. These are not the gestures of a provider in the economic sense - Grange remains, to the end, a poor man on a small farm. They are the gestures of a man who has understood that protection is not about money. It is about the transmission of dignity, the creation of a space in which a Black girl can know herself as fully human in a world designed to tell her otherwise.

This reorientation resonates with Saidiya Hartman's (2007) meditation in *Lose Your Mother* on what slavery's afterlife demands of the living. Hartman (2007) writes:

slavery had established a measure of man and a ranking of life and worth that has yet to be undone [...] black lives are still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus

and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago. This is the afterlife of slavery (p. 16).

Grange's third life can be read as one man's attempt to interrupt that afterlife in the only space available to him - the intimate space of a relationship with a child. He cannot change the racial arithmetic. But he can refuse to let it be the only inheritance he passes on.

Collins (2000) observes that “adhering to a male-defined ethos that far too often equates racial progress with the acquisition of an ill-defined manhood has left much U.S. Black thought with a prominent masculinist bias (p. 24). Grange's third life is Walker's (1970) fictional answer to that bias. He abandons the masculinist equation - manhood as provision, as dominance, as the right to define the household - and replaces it with something quieter and more durable. When Ruth stations herself close to him in his moments of shame, lifting his bowed gray head with her pigtails pressed under his chin, and they embrace, the novel offers its most compressed image of what complementarity can look like when it is finally freed from patriarchal anxiety: not a husband and wife locked in the economics of the cotton field, but a grandfather and granddaughter holding each other up, imperfect and necessary to one another, choosing presence over flight.

Walker (1970), in her own afterword, states the novel's moral with the clarity of someone who has earned it: “The white man's oppression of me will never excuse my oppression of you, whether you are man, woman, child, animal or tree, because the self that I prize refuses to be owned by him. Or by anyone” (p. 243). Grange Copeland's third life is the fictional embodiment of that refusal. It does not undo the damage of the first two lives. It does not resurrect Margaret or restore Mem. But it insists, against the full weight of the system that shaped him, on the existence of a self that the system cannot entirely claim - and it offers that self, finally and completely, to the one person left who needs it.

Conclusion

This article examined how the sharecropping system of the American South produces, in Grange and Brownfield Copeland, a patriarchal anxiety so consuming that it renders matrimonial complementarity structurally impossible - and to what extent Grange's “third life” offers a redemptive redefinition of Black masculinity grounded in accountability rather than provision.

The analysis has established three interconnected findings. First, the destruction of the Black male provider is not a moral failure but a structural production: the sharecropping economy

systematically empties Grange of economic agency, and that emptiness - read through Fanon's (1963) colonial psychopathology - is redirected as domestic violence onto the nearest available bodies, Margaret and then, through Brownfield, onto Mem. The weekly cycle Walker (1970) describes, from Monday's hangover to Saturday's explosion, is not the rhythm of a broken man's character but the rhythm of a broken system's logic inscribed on a household. Second, matrimonial complementarity - present in embryonic form in both marriages, most tenderly rendered in Brownfield and Mem's early union - is not simply absent but actively murdered. Walker's (1970) Pygmalion-in-reverse figure captures this with precision: Brownfield does not merely fail to sustain what existed between them; he methodically dismantles it, beginning with Mem's voice and ending with her face. Judith Herman's (1997) framework of coercive captivity illuminates the invisible bars that keep these women trapped long after any emotional bond has dissolved. Third, Grange's redemption, while genuinely achieved, is neither total nor transferable. It arrives too late for Margaret, too late for Mem, and is offered exclusively to Ruth. Walker (1970) encodes this limitation into the structure of the novel itself - the third life redeems one man and protects one child, but it cannot interrupt the cycle it has already set in motion through Brownfield.

This article contributes to Walker (1970) scholarship by proposing a dual theoretical framework - Fanonian colonial psychopathology articulated with Womanist theory - that allows analysts to hold the structural and the intimate simultaneously in view. Where previous studies have tended to privilege either the racial-political dimension or the feminist-domestic one, this pairing demonstrates that neither is fully legible without the other. The broken provider is simultaneously a colonial subject and a patriarchal agent, and only a framework that accounts for both registers can do justice to Walker's (1970) moral complexity.

Several avenues remain open. A comparative study between *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970) and *The Color Purple* (1982) could trace Walker's evolving theorization of Black masculinity and domestic repair across two decades of writing. Similarly, extending the Fanonian lens to other African American novels of the sharecropping era - Ernest Gaines's (1983) *A Gathering of Old Men*, for instance - could test the generalizability of the broken provider framework across the broader literary geography of the Jim Crow South. Finally, applying an intersectional reading informed by Collins's (2000) matrix of domination to the figure of Ruth as the novel's "soul survivor" could open productive questions about the role of the Black girl child as both witness and inheritor of the domestic archive of racial violence - a question that Walker's later fiction, and contemporary Black feminist theory, continue to press.

Bibliography

- Walker, A. (1970). *The third life of Grange Copeland*. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- Harris, T. (1982). *From mammies to militants: Domestics in Black American literature*. Temple University Press.
- McDowell, D. E. (1980). "New directions for Black feminist criticism". *The Black Scholar*, 11(7), 15–24.
- Collins, P. H. (2000). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Rabaka, R. (2010). *Forms of Fanonism: Frantz Fanon's critical theory and the dialectics of decolonization*. Lexington Books.
- Fanon, F. (1963). *The wretched of the earth* (C. Farrington, Trans.). Grove Press.
- Walker, A. (1983). *In search of our mothers' gardens: Womanist prose*. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- hooks, b. (2004). *We real cool: Black men and masculinity*. Routledge.
- Herman, J. L. (1997). *Trauma and recovery: The aftermath of violence—from domestic abuse to political terror* (Rev. ed.). Basic Books.
- hooks, b. (2010). *Teaching critical thinking: Practical wisdom*. Routledge.
- hooks, b. (1984). *Feminist theory: From margin to center*. South End Press.
- Hartman, S. (2007). *Lose your mother: A journey along the Atlantic slave route*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Walker, A. (1982). *The color purple*. arcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- Gaines, E. J. (1983). *A gathering of old men*. Alfred A. Knopf.