

Social Issues and Women in The Third Life of Grange Copeland

Prafulkumar P. Vaidhya

Assistant Professor of English, Sardar Patel Mahavidyalaya, Ganj Ward, Chandrapur 442402

Abstract

The research paper primarily deals with social issues depicted in the novel *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* by Alice Walker. It is least concerned about the issues related to male but still it deals with those male issues which are directly or indirectly influenced the life of women in society. Social issue or problem is a condition or episodes or set of events which are undesirable to people in the society. The research paper on the basis of depiction of female protagonists Margaret and Mem and other characters surmises that the control of social situation is beyond the ability of one person. The society at large is responsible for all this. There is a possibility without doubt that social problems may change in the due course of time. A social problem which is not considered in the past may be called so in present situation. On the other hand any social issue which was prevalent in the past may not be in the present scenario. The research paper highlights the social issues in the novel and attempts to categorize them into family issues and community issues. It also attempts to aware and the family and society in general about social issues and brings the change in the world.

Key Words: Alice Walker, The Third Life of Grange Copeland, Social Issues, Women, Feminism.

Introduction

The first part of 20th century in Afro-American literature witnessed the writing which advocated the resistance on the basis of race by male writers. Richard Wright and some other writers felt compelled and obligated to deal with this issue of race. The whole machinery of American base and superstructure dictated that kind of protest writing. However, the second half of the twentieth century witnessed the paradigm shift in African American literature. The major shift has been from the focus of issue of race to that of gender. Issues of gender has got prominent place in literature due to re-emergence of feminist movement in 1970's. Gender oppression and marginalization of females became the target for destruction with the increase of black female voices (Deena 106).

Alice Walker has been hailed as a powerful voice of the marginalized people in the Afro-American society. She along with African-American women writers shifts her critical attention to the issues of black women. Her concern for black women is equated with the universal concerns of feminism. She talks of system that is responsible for black women's marginal situation in her writings. Her novels speak of only African American community but have managed to convey that speak of all communities.

Walker's *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (Hereafter *TTLOGC*) was published in 1970. It is considered as a window to the subjugation of the black people and black women. Walker's area of concern is the domestic sphere where the black women are the significant principle. She firmly believes that the victims of violence are pummeled both from within and without. From within black women are

victims of ignorance, poverty, frustration. Sometimes such overwhelming limitations drive them to such a madness to consider suicide as release from all sorrows. From without, they are victims of slavery, subordination, wife beating and male chauvinism.

Sharecrop System and Slavery

Slavery is a man made cancer (deadly disease) specifically by white, to the blacks. Due to this system, blacks are bought and sold like a commodity. They are treated like objects in the market. Blacks are exploited in such a way that they are deprived of their basic and fundamental rights. Blacks are deprived of education and economic welfare. The exploitative tendencies of the white weaken the cultural and moral strength of the black. Blacks are out of the spheres of industries too. They are deprived of possessing the land. In addition to this blacks are in debt of them and can never escape from this cycle. In this condition they have to rely on the privileged class. The privileged class always takes advantage of this and harasses them. Grange is in the debt of white master, Shipley and cannot escape harassment. He passes his indebtedness to his son, Brownfield. They are bound in the circle of indebtedness like an Indian poor farmer. Grange and Brownfield both suffer in white racist society. They lead a life in slavery of white masters. This slavery is another form of enforced loneliness on them.

Brownfield is made weak and ineffective person by white racist society. The white unjust and belittling behavior towards black and particularly to Brownfield makes his position in his society very miserable. He has no role model to follow in his life. The negative effects of sharecropping and racist segregation affect his life greatly. This makes him powerless and helpless in the society. To show his power in society, he turns violent. He dominates over his wife and daughters.

Domestic Violence

Evelyn White defines 'domestic violence' in terms of battering of woman. It is a physical act of one person beating another. The abusive acts include physical abuse, emotional abuse and sexual abuse. White believes that the discussion of domestic violence is quite essential as it is an issue of concern of all societies of the world. She further adds that most of the societies are culturally and legally quite supportive towards actions that keep women subordinate to men either physically or emotionally and economically.

In the novel *TTLOGC* one can easily find the issue of wife beating. Through the wife beating male characters try to reduce black women to absolute submission. By enduring this, black women are left with no dignity. Brownfield beats his wife. Once he beats her in such a way that she loses her teeth. Mem recalls one such encounter: "That was the first time he knocked out a teeth. He knocked out one and loosened one or two more" (Walker, "TTLOGC" 83). Mem's physical tormenting by her husband force her to feel mental pressure. This results into miserable plight of Mem. Educated, confident and pretty Mem turns into ordinary and low confident woman and reduced to skin and bones. Thereafter she is prone to question herself.

Margaret's married life is full of sorrows. Her sorrows and pains are in her life because of her husband. She moves in the life with the mood of her husband. Grange is frustrated unhappy man. He turns to drinking to relieve his tensions of the day. His drinking results into bad treatment to Margaret. He suspects the character of his wife. When she casually talks to anybody, he gets furious. She is insulted and beaten badly thereafter. Inhuman treatment meted out and no happiness in life compels her to commit suicide.

The characters: Mem and Margaret are vulnerable to their husband's beating. Mem is educated and Margaret is not. But it seems that there is no any relation between the educational level and beatings of the victims. In Margaret's case husband's alcoholism and jealousy seems main reasons of his beating

wife. Both Grange and Brownfield deny their wives any attempt to assert their self-worth. When Mem tries to raise the standard of living of their family, Brownfield systematically first destroys her health and then her spirit. Finally he kills her in the face at point blank range. He wipes out her identity. Alice Walker, through the character of Mem, pinpoints how all women are treated badly by males in any patriarchal society.

Child Labour

Child labour is a very serious problem. It harms greatly to child mentally and physically. Child labours are by and large underpaid workforce. Laboring since childhood affects the education of a child. It robs him/her days of playing. There is a possibility of harming child labours by the owner. They are helpless in such a situation. It spoils the life of child completely.

Brownfield is a victim of child labour. When he is of just six years old, he is taught by his mother how to feed and milk the cow. He helps her in these activities. He also works with his father in planting, chopping, poisoning and picking in the cotton field for four years since he is of six year old. He works in the company of other child workers. The children's job is to go over the rows their parents had gone over week before – “scrapping cotton” it is called. Brownfield is engaged in laborious acts in the house and outside from childhood, as a result he remains away from education and becomes illiterate. This costs him a lot in his life.

Racism

The history of blacks is full of racism. It prevailed for long time in afro-America. It can be defined as the hatred for another person. It stands on the belief that whites are far more superior to black people. Black are less than human being and are like animals is the consideration of whites. Racism has influenced slavery and wars and formation of nations.

The issue of race prominently appears in *TTLOGC*. In the racist society, blacks are trapped in by the whites. Racism influences the black males in such a way that they change both physically and psychologically. And this change due to racism results into their relationships to be crumbled. Black man's relation with his wife and children spoils due to influences of racism. The whites are masters to the blacks and the blacks are supposed to obey their masters. Thus black are marginalized in the society. To exercise the power like their masters, they deliberately impose burden on their family members.

Amritjit Singh in his text *The Novels of the Harlem Renaissance: Twelve Black Writers* provides an architectural image to understand the social location of the Blacks, in general, whose isolation is a consequence of colour prejudice. He says, “Being coloured is like being born in the basement of life, with the door locked and barred – and the white people live upstairs” The whites' main function in the novel is to signify a domineering and dehumanizing force. Brownfield is a victim of racism and is oppressed indirectly by the whites and the existing social structures. The Whites physically enslave him and dehumanized him and in turn he incurs his wrath on his family members specially his submissive wife, Mem. He beats her savagely. He ill-treats his children too.

The whites are mostly racist and they are not punished because either they are member of dominant class or somehow connected with the group which holds the positions of power like judiciary, politics and law-enforcement. Hence the victimized people become less capable and less worthwhile. It results into social oppression and social marginalization of the blacks.

The various social issues of women and men are depicted in the novel. Issues of women like gender discrimination, domestic violence and wife battering are related to family. Caste discrimination, racism and slavery are related to group or community. The research paper discusses the effects of social problems on an individual. It is found that in the discourse of social issues: gender discrimination is a

burning issue which appears in the novel. The family related problems can be solved easily than the problems related to community or group. Traditional gender roles cast men as “rational, strong, protective and decisive; they cast women as emotional (irrational), weak, nurturing and submissive” (Tyson 85). These assigned roles to men and women by the society are responsible for the rise of various social issues concerning women. Walker doesn’t mean to highlight the issues of women only, but pointing to the need for creating awareness about these issues and bring change in society. The novelist pilots the trend of making women as well as society conscious regarding the innumerable man-made cancers by which women are being thrust into drab and drudgery of exploitation.

Works Cited

1. Ahuja, Ram. *Social Problems in India*. Rawat Publications, 2014.
2. Burgess, R.L. “Child abuse: A Sociological International Analysis.” *Advances in Clinical Psychology*, edited by Ben Lahey and Alan Kazdin, vol. 2, Plenum Press, 1979.
3. Deena, Seodial. “Alice Walker’s Decolonization of the Traditional Love in *The Color Purple*”. *Alice Walker’s The Color Purple: A Reader’s Companion*, edited by Nandita Sinha, Asia Book Club, 2002, pp. 107-120.
4. Tyson, Lois. *Critical Theory Today*. Routledge, 2006.
5. Walker, Alice. *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*. Phoenix, 2004.