

Violent and Uninvolved Fathers in The Third Life of Grange Copeland

الآباء العنيفون وغير المتورطين في الحياة الثالثة لجرانغ كوبلاند

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Abstract

The present article tackles father-daughter relationship in the Afro-American community as it is depicted in Alice Walker's novel *the Third Life of Grange Copeland*. The objective of the study is to demonstrate the destructive bond that connects black American fathers with their daughters. Therefore, questions as how father-daughter relationship is represented in *the Third Life of Grange Copeland*; in what sense daughters are fatherless; and what causes fathers' uninvolved and/or violence in *the Third Life of Grange Copeland*, are raised to investigate the aforementioned topic. To approach these problematic issues, we hypothesise that father-daughter relationship is negatively represented in Walker's novel; fathers are portrayed as violent on and uninvolved in the lives of their daughters; and that violence and uninvolved of black American fathers occur as an attempt to identify with their male gender roles. Following a gender-based analysis, we arrived at confirming fathers' violence and absenteeism in their daughters' lives as an outcome of masculine gender stereotypes focussing on nurturance avoidance in males' dispositions.

Keywords: Daughters, Fathers, Male Gender Roles, Nurturance, Uninvolved, Violence.

المخلص بالعربية:

تتناول هذه المقالة العلاقة بين الأب وابنته في المجتمع الأفريقي - الأمريكي كما تم تصويرها في رواية أليس ووكر "الحياة الثالثة لجرانغ كوبلاند". الهدف من الدراسة هو إظهار الرابطة المدمرة التي تربط الآباء الأمريكيين السود ببنتاتهم. في هذا الإطار أسئلة مثل: كيفية تمثيل العلاقة بين الأب وابنته في الحياة الثالثة لجرانغ كوبلاند؛ بأي معنى تكون البنات اليتيمات، وما الذي يسبب عدم تدخل الآباء و / أو العنف في الحياة الثالثة لجرانغ كوبلاند، تثار

للتحقيق في الموضوع المذكور أعلاه. للتعامل مع هذه الإشكالية، نفترض أن العلاقة بين الأب وابنته ممثلة سلبيًا في رواية ووكرك؛ يتم تصوير الآباء على أنهم عنيفون وغير مشاركين في حياة بناتهم، وأن العنف وعدم تدخل الآباء الأمريكيين السود يحدث كمحاولة للتماهي مع أدوار الذكور بين الجنسين. بعد تحليل قائم على النوع الاجتماعي، توصلنا إلى تأكيد عنف الآباء وتغيبهم عن حياة بناتهم كنتيجة للصور النمطية الذكورية الجنسانية التي تركز على تجنب التنشئة في تصرفات الذكور.

الكلمات المفتاحية: البنات، الآباء، أدوار الذكور، التنشئة، عدم التدخل، العنف.

1. Introduction

One of the chief concerns of anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists, and of fiction writers alike is family dynamism and the nature of the relationship between its members. Alice Walker's *the Third Life of Grange Copeland* –as a fictional work-- tackles the black American family activity in the era that spans the time from the 1920's to the 1960's in the American South, covering by that three-generational life cycle (of Grange, Brownfield and Ruth). Walker sketches a variety of male figures who turn to be much more recurrences than adopting different behaviours or guiding different styles of life. Therefore, the same ideology is represented through different characters in different incidents to depict daughter-father relationship.

2. Father-Daughter Relationship in *the Third Life of Grange Copeland*

Fathers' indifference and violence govern father-daughter relationships in Walker's novel. Daughters spend childhoods in violent home atmospheres, childhoods that stand under the shadow of the unbalanced power relationship of fathers and mothers. They also all witness a life bound up by two extremities, a caring nurturing mother and a torturing father.

All fathers in *the Third Life of Grange Copeland* are portrayed as violent and uninvolved as far as their relationships to their daughters are concerned. Father-daughter good relationship finds no promising opportunities to live, for female

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children characters are physically abused, abandoned and badly treated by their fathers. The father is either violent, absent or indifferent to his daughter. Father's limited involvement results in less mature, more dependent, low self-esteem and depressed daughter (Videon 64; Coley 221). Hence, low self-esteem, terror and indifference are the emotions that fathers grow in their daughters in the novel. "He [Brownfield] had given them [his daughters] weakness when they needed strength, made them powerless in front of any enemy that stood beyond them" (227). Brownfield teases his daughters, swears at and calls them names like *stupid*, *crazy* and *tramp*. He also heavily beats them and frightens them with his gun. Black fathers like Brownfield, therefore, make their daughters feel weak and inferior to any oppressor; be they their sexist black men or white racist people. Radu(14) states that violence that fathers perpetuate on their daughters predisposes them to intimate partner violence in the future, as it creates weakness and self-abasement, among many other socio-psychological problems which abused or fatherless girls are likely to encounter.

To remember Daddy when he was good is a game that Brownfield's daughters, Daphne, Ornette and Ruth play in secret and which derives out of their pure imagination. The three girls try to gain a degree of emotional energy from memories of the happy and secure days when their father was good and nurturing; a detail which is missing in reality, for Brownfield had never been such a good father. Through the game they have invented, they have attempted to fill a gap in their lives which reflects a lack of love and affection.

When Brownfield overheard Ornette babbling to Ruth about some extraordinary kindness he had done her (“he bought me a dress” or “he fixed my dolly”) he did not think anything of it except that Ornette was going to turn out to be an incorrigible liar. They knew he did not understand their game and that made it all the more fun; their “good” daddy would have understood they said, which proved Brownfield was nothing compared to him (111).

No good memories are shared between Brownfield and his daughters. In the same way, their yearning of causing their father’s death is expressed in the novel. They “wished nothing so hard as that their father would trip over his own stumbling feet, fall on his open knife and manage somehow to jab his heart out” (91); a wish that they keep having as day and night dream and that would eventually set them free. This wish reflects the terror their father causes them; the image of a father in his daughter’s conception is that of an oppressor, a tyrant. “She [Daphne] hallucinated vividly that Brownfield [her father] ate so many peas he swoll up and burst. She saw herself helping gleefully to bury him and then watched in horror as the huge twisting and congested pea vines began to come up. Aloud she began a strange blank-eyed whimper” (82). Daphne’s hallucination gives the impression that her father never ceases to oppress them; that his torment keeps persistent during their whole lives.

At the graduation ceremonies, and feeling happy for her positive academic achievement and proud for her teachers’ praise, Rossel Pascal (a school mate to Ruth) wishes to “fling herself into her father’s arms” (190). She dearly wishes it that her father gets involved in her happiness and shares with her the

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delight of success. It is an impossible wish, nevertheless, for “father and daughter gazed at each other with eyes like closing doors” (190). Fathers close all the doors that would give an opportunity to beautiful emotions to thrive. Fathers and daughters have become as strangers who do not share any emotions or even memories --as it is the case with Brownfield and his daughters. Uninvolved as he has always been, Rossel’s father deprives his daughter of his affection and love. Rossel is also subject to child marriage which is considered by many as a crime; it is one form of violence exercised on the wellbeing, freedom and dignity of women as indicated by all of WHO (10) and CARE (25). Through this forced marriage, Rossel’s father *sells* her to Walt Terrell, who is as old as her own father, but the richest black man in the county to pay back his debts of sharecropping (190).

Non-resident absent fathers’ phenomenon also prevails in *the Third Life of Grange Copeland*. Mem has never known her real biological father, for he abandoned her pregnant single mother before Mem’s coming to the world. No sooner had Mem’s mother conceived of her than he ran away from her never telling her of his whereabouts; never recognising his fatherhood to Mem. Odd the case is, for Mem’s father has been a preacher, he has been among those calling for harmony, peace and love among the whole community; yet “*every Sunday –the placid Christ-deferential self righteous of men tortured their children and on Saturday nights beat their wives*” (133). Mem feels wronged twice by her father; while he has abandoned her and when having refused to save her from her husband’s violence. “She wrote a letter to her father, whom she had never seen, and

he never bothered to answer the letter (58). He also refuses to embrace her within his new family.

In one and the only scene that gathers Brownfield and Ruth -as father and daughter- in an amicable dialogue, Ruth vowed her agonies and long kept torment to him. “You never cared for us”, said Ruth. “You never cared for mama or Daphne or Ornette, or for me”. “I don’t want any of your damn changes now, she thought, and hated and liked herself for this lack of charity” (217). Ruth does not trust her father anymore, for besides being their oppressor, her father has been her own mother’s murderer.

Josie is another female character whose childhood has not been free from father’s oppression either. Josie’s father, a preacher as he is, exercises all forms of violence (as physical, emotional and even sexual) and torture on his daughter. The traumatic life experiences that Josie has witnessed during her childhood with her tyrant father cause her severe psychological disorders displaying mainly through the recurrent nightmare she has kept having –when feeling her father riding her in dreams. The deepest and most traumatic memories of the horror of sexual assaults keep recurring to Josie in her dreams. What happens to Josie is quite predictable as persistent nightmares are common to survivors of trauma (Ducey and Bessel 260 and Lennings, et al. 19). The depiction of Josie’s father -though a flat character- is one of the most extensive and memorable portraits of violent fathers in the novel.

Learning of his daughter’s illegitimate teenage pregnancy (caused by continual rape on her), he tortures her in his male friends’ presence - and who have all been blameworthy for her

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pregnancy; while she “lay like an exhausted, overturned pregnant turtle underneath her father’s foot. He pressed his foot into her shoulder and dared them to touch her. She was heaving and vomiting and choking on her own puke” (40). Despite Josie has left her violent father, for he has expelled her from home at the age of sixteen, the dream pursues her until her late adulthood. “Her father how did she remember him? A question asked slowly always in bewilderment, to dull the unforgotten impression of one cruel night” (39).

Through Josie’s, Mem’s childhood, and Brownfield’s daughters’ childhood; the text provides a vivid depiction of fathers absenteeism; and of the oppression and tyranny that fathers cause to their daughters. Women’s cruel reality and their feelings of abandonment make them feel isolation and helplessness, which inhibit them from ending any violation of their bodies and their souls in a male-chauvinist society.

Residential fathers have no positive role, likewise, for they are either uninvolved or violent on their daughters. Being resident in the same home with his daughters, Brownfield tortures and oppresses them. Daphne, Brownfield’s eldest daughter “had bad sickness once a month and would cry and cry, and one time, when she was holding her stomach and crying, with sweat popping out like grease bubbles on her face, Brownfield had kicked her right where her hands were. He was trying to sleep and couldn’t because of the noise, he said” (119). Hence, violence, uninvolvedness, and oppression are all what Brownfield could afford to his daughters.

An involved father is the one who is geared to provide responsibility, engagement and accessibility –as the three major

themes associated with fatherhood involvement that have been pointed at by Marsiglio, et al (269); Lamb and Tamis-Lemonda(6); and Pleck and Masciadrelli (223). Responsibility as defined by Pleck and Masciadrelli is “the role father takes in making sure the child is taken care of and arranging for resources to be available for the child” (223). In words that resonate with Pleck and Masciadrelli’s analysis of the so-called father engagement and father accessibility as two other components of father involvement, father engagement is the direct contact between the father and his child; and accessibility refers to the father’s availability for interactions with his child – be they direct or indirect. Therefore, and according to Watson (cited in Thornton 2), any biological father who is emotionally and/or financially uninvolved is viewed as an absent father, for father involvement should not involve only a biological commitment but a whole “bio-psycho-social” commitment. In this respect, Grange has been --to a great degree-- an involved other father to Ruth. Another father is a social father, a make-kin (like an uncle, a grandfather...) or community father (like a teacher, a pastor, or a coach...).

Fathers’ involvement is reflected through support, guidance and nurturance for their daughters and it stands as a good counterforce diminishing male biases. Developing a positive self-image and self-esteem is highly linked to the involvement of fathers in their daughters’ lives. Biller (19-34) reasons that a father’s presence and involvement is equally important to the mother’s in daughters’ psychological health, self-confidence, school achievement and intimate relationships. While, others like Dunlop et al. (120) argue that fathers can -

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more than mothers- boost up or else lower their daughters' self esteem or self-worth, and self-confidence; an impact that is not only more influential but also more long-lasting.

Daughters feel their fathers represent an integral part of their lives. "Being in her life, being sensitive and alert towards her feelings, having time to listen to her, showing interest in her hobbies and verbal approval or praise are very crucial factors for building her positive self-esteem and self-image"(Amber-Malik and Massoom 315).

Father's absence affects the psycho-social wellbeing of the child in general and of the daughter in particular. Father's absence has detrimental effects on girls' psychological wellbeing (Mancini 11; Johnson 7). All fathers in Walker's narrative are portrayed as absent fathers (either as non-resident or resident uninvolved); a fact that, hence, creates non-supportive daughter-father relationships.

Josie's father, although as uninvolved as he has always been, berates and punishes her for her mistakes; not to show her wrong from right, not to make her learn from her mistakes, nonetheless; but it is out of his feeling of shame in front of his male friends. He violently reacts against her illegitimate pregnancy while he himself has been one of her rapists, one of her tormentors. Marcus insists that a good father should be a "good disciplinarian (...) He strongly disapproves of his children's misdeeds, using tough love to prove a point"(1). Marcus (1) also thinks that a good father should be fully aware that mistakes are inevitable; however, he would not forgive his children's repeated irresponsibility. In this respect, Josie's father does not prove as a good father; for he himself cannot serve as a

good disciplinarian, he himself cannot be a right model to shape one's conduct on. He punishes Josie for a mistake, a sin, she has no hand in. Strangely as it is that her rapists have been all her father's friends. And what is rather odd is he himself rapes her once as a reaction against her being raped by others; the fact that eventually makes her turn to prostitution. Josie's father provides neither guidance nor economic support to prevent her from psychological and sexual deviation. Thornton (6) argues that the Afro-American father who offers conduct and financial support for his child is believed to be able to encourage him/her and help prevent his/her possible social and psychological problems. Fathers' involvement is unique and significant in the biological, psychological and social well-being and development of daughters. Hence, daughters expect more from their fathers. Josie, driven by her hopes to gain his sympathy, entreats her father to accept her once more in the family; he however refuses her and tortures her instead.

Josie's case is the most paradoxical one in the novel, and what makes it rather strange is her father's reaction towards the presents and the money his daughter offers him. Josie's father readily enough welcomes the presents Josie offers him and which she buys from the very money she gains from prostitution. He also absolves himself from any responsibility towards her when expelling her from home at the age of sixteen.

Young women who have been subject to fathers' negligence and violence respond with losing voice and confidence in their thoughts; the fact that turn them into withdrawal and silence (Gilligan and Brown 5). Daughters forsaken by their fathers or subject to their violence feel

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unworthy and unwanted. Josie develops weak and unbalanced psychology and loses self-confidence mainly when failed and discarded by her own father. Mem too feels weak and unprotected mostly because her biological father refuses to acknowledge her. As a consequence, fathers in *the Third Life of Grange Copeland* are evaluated as bad models for fathers. Josie's father appears as a disciplinarian patriarch, Mem's father as a non-residential absentee uninvolved father, Grange as residential absentee uninvolved father, and Brownfield as a tyrant patriarch.

Arguably, in addition to the two male protagonists, Grange and Brownfield, and who are represented as sharecroppers, the text introduces all the other fathers as *preachers* who preach for love, compassion, forgiveness among all people; and who, nevertheless, keep only violence to their wives and daughters.

The absence of a biological father in a child girl's life shapes the way she becomes as an adult. Never has he been a positive male model for his daughters, Brownfield causes severe psychological and mental troubles for them. An absentee father is not only he who does not reside in the same home with his child (daughter), but is the one who never or has recently ceased to make a positive, meaningful, and constant effect on the life of his child. Brownfield's daughters' fates all demonstrate the dangerous drawbacks of absentee and/or cruel fathers. "Daphne's in a crazy house up north. And, Ornette –Ornette's a – a lady of pleasure" (218), as reported in a letter by Ruth's maternal grandfather to Brownfield.

It would sound more meaningful if Josie's father have blamed a great part of his own conduct - as an absentee father - before blaming or punishing his daughter for her teenage pregnancy. As Nowak (1) believes teenage pregnancies are highly linked to father's absenteeism.

This evokes the same fate to Ornette, Brownfield's daughter second daughter, who has showed a considerable interest in sex and sex-related language at a very early age. Driven by her father's uninvolved involvement, Ornette eventually takes the same path of Josie and turns into a prostitute. All of Ellis et al (14) and Mancini (11) believe that uninvolved fathers cause their daughters' teenage pregnancy, promiscuity and other emotional effects. "He thought she would grow up to be a plump, easygoing tramp and was telling her so constantly by the time she was eight. Ornette learned to toss her head at him. When she was seven she refused to go to church or to say her bedtime prayers. She had a flexible sexual vocabulary at eight and a decided interest in [sex] at nine" (112). Both Josie and Ornette seek male attention as a make up for the real love and real attention they have been missing from their fathers. As Bogan and Krohn (1) argue, fatherless females look for more attention from men; they are consistently entangled in promiscuity and hence more physical contact with boys of their age than daughters with involved fathers. This can be further illustrated by "the waywardness of Ornette, whose every act was done to make someone to notice her" (218).

3. Black American Fathers' Masculinity

Black American men in *the Third Life of Grange Copeland* endure oppression and racial discrimination by their

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white counterparts. Hence --and belonging to a subordinate male group—, black fathers are portrayed as wistfully lamenting a loss of their manhood. They are therefore living in a constant struggle to compensate for their lost masculine identity.

A rather important discursive notion implied in the text is fathers' ownership of their daughters. Fathers -like Brownfield- think of their daughters as their own properties; which -as they believe- is a masculine privilege.

"You mine! Mine" he said, holding her with possessive eyes.

"You belongs to me, like my chickens or my hogs" he said.

"If you love me, leave me alone!"

"No", he said, pushing her alone. "I can't do that. I'm a man. And a man's got to have *something* of his own!" (219).

I am a man becomes Brownfield's and the other black fathers' slogan; a narratological analysis of this statement will ostensibly reveal a multiple layers of meaning. It becomes the decided substitute for a dominant, a patriarch.

As any aspect of human behaviour and interaction, fathering for Afro-American men is also likely to be influenced by culture. The possession of daughters derives out of a very important and significant determinant of fathering which is associated with institutional practices and cultural norms as indicated by Lamb and Tamis-Lemonda (11), as fathers are likely to further subscribe to the masculine gender role and mainly that of the breadwinner. The representation of the *father* in *the Third Life of Grange Copeland* is an illustration of complex masculinity. All the fathers in this novel participate and relate to the discourse of hegemonic masculinity. Walker's approach to gender in general and masculinity in particular is

rooted in a binary power structure that display through a power game occurring between males and female characters. The cause of fathers' uninvolved in their daughters' lives is not clearly decided as different readings of the novel imply. Walker has penetrated beneath the surface to the underlying personality essentials of her characters. An ideal material of Walker is a narrow social setting where individuals interact with one another (husbands and wives, blacks and whites and fathers and daughters) to voice her ideological notion of hegemonic masculinity as a strategy to gain dominance over women (be they wives, sisters, daughters, or whatsoever).

“You don't know what it *like* for a man to live down here. You don't know what I been through!” “I couldn't even express my love”. (219). To be a man means not to express any emotions. Nurture is a prescribed feminine gender role, as Brannon and Juni (6) declares, men are commonly believed to be adventurous, dominant, forceful, independent, masculine tough and strong; while women are more sentimental, submissive and nurturing. Therefore, what women are indicates what men are, should, not be. In order to be accepted among the male/dominant group, men believe that they have to conform to, prove and maintain their masculine identity; and this is through comprising all what is decided by the gender culture to be masculine. In this sense, the equation can be summed up as to be masculine is to be not feminine, and vice versa.

Many like Hasanthi (105) refers to black male violence on their families as displacement of men's feelings of helplessness and as a cue for the crisis afflicting their existence due to the economic and social pressures imposed on them as blacks. Hasanthi argues this violence is rooted in black men's desperate

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struggle for survival in a white patriarchal society. I believe that black men's neglect of and violence on their daughters is rather founded on notions like ownership of women and toughness as fundamental components of masculinity. The father figure in Walker's work illustrates hegemonic masculinity that displays through uninvolved fatherhood. The notion of the kind father is totally absent in the novel (except for the congenial other father role played by Ruth's grandfather Grange who -at last- expresses his regrets of having abused women and children to prove manhood). The fact is that Walker's characters develop complex and contradictory identities; each possesses an intricate identity torn between subjectivity and his socio-economic reality that confines his power and dictates his agency. The black man's identity oscillates between gender conventions and their socio-economic and historical factors.

Black men in the novel, express silent rebellion (issued through depression) against their jobs which stand as a source of humiliation for them instead of financial support or economic independence. Being hegemonic males, their besetting socio-economic hardships represent a real assault. Their expectations as men and their duties as fathers do no match with their realities as blacks.

One of Walker's critiques of patriarchy is inserted on the father figure as complicit in masculine hegemony. "The word 'father' itself can no longer be used as a neutral term in the Humanities and might even require capitalization to underline its metonymic significance in connection with power relations" (Radu 48). When fatherhood enters the realm of gender, the concept gains new dimensions and meanings, the most important of which is *patriarchy*. Fathers, in relation to their daughters, become tyrant oppressors in the novel. "She [Ruth] looked perplexed. Always she spoke of her father as He with capital H, as if she were speaking of God. At times like now she both hated

and respected him” (142). Ruth hates Brownfield, for he shows hatred against her and makes her feel hatred against him; and she respects him, for it is culture which makes her feel respect towards him. The father-daughter relationship in this novel reads as conforming to the gender script.

When men’s superiority /power is questionable, they feel insecure; a feeling of insecurity that they transmit -in their turn- to their wives and children. Daphne’s lunatic behaviour may have developed out of the horror her father has created in her and her two younger sisters while making them live in fear and torture and while murdering their mother in their very presence.

4. Conclusion

The previously mentioned facts lead one to conclude that all black daughters could be evaluated as fatherless, for fathers in Walker’s work could be classified as either violent or indifferent (uninvolved fathers); roles that ultimately contradict the feminine nurturing roles and that mothers generally adopt. The black father-daughter dyad never reflects a nurturing relationship. Thus, black female characters are subject to violence exerted on them by their fathers before being exposed to their men’s violence. Fathers’ violence and absenteeism are likely to predispose girls to grow into submissive and vulnerable women; to be more sensitive to and even to passively react towards gender inequalities and the social injustices as a whole.

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