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Research Paper

Witnessing Trauma and Learning Survival: Ruth's Post-Maternal Psychology in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* by Alice Walker

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ABSTRACT: *Alice Walker's (1970) The Third Life of Grange Copeland explores in a heart-rending way the generational trauma in the Jim crow South. This article aims to highlight the psychological development of Ruth, who, after witnessing her mother's murder by her father, needs to construct an identity. The parallel between Ruth's survival and her autonomy is the main issue addressed in this study. It seeks to understand whether her resilience is a true reclamation of self or a byproduct of her grandfather Grange's protective isolation. The main purpose is to examine Ruth's life through three critical stages: traumatic rupture, pedagogical reconstruction, and adolescent self-actualization. Utilizing a qualitative methodology grounded in close reading, the study adopts Post-Maternal Psychoanalysis, Critical Race Theory, and Black Feminist Pedagogy as lenses to better interpret the corpus. The findings indicate that Ruth's "post-maternal" psychology is deeply marked and shaped by an initial identity dismantling. Grange takes the responsibility of helping Ruth gain her selfhood through "decolonizing" education. By creating "sacred playspaces" and cultivating critical consciousness, Grange helps Ruth prevail over paternal violence. In sum, the study reveals that Ruth gains a fragile but true autonomy that enables her to transcend inherited trauma and move determinedly toward a bright future.*

Keywords*: Autonomy, Generational trauma, Post-maternal psychology, Protective sanctuary, Resilience.*

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I. INTRODUCTION

The intersection of systemic racism and domestic pathology shapes the trajectory of Black female coming-of-age in Southern literature. In *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, Walker (1970) portrays this situation in a terrifying tone through the character of Ruth. Brownfield is perceived to be literally broken and dehumanized by the sharecropping system. His father Grange was also entrapped by structural racism and oppression but had enough sense to flee to the North. Upon his return from the North, he engages in a redemptive quest for absolution. Unlike Brownfield and Grange, Ruth represents "the third generation", the potential break from a long-lasting despair resulting from structural oppression. However, Ruth's strength is entrenched in a profound paradox: she must craft an autonomous identity and selfhood from the ashes of a traumatic experience–witnessing maternal murder.

Scholars such as Trudier Harris have historically looked at Walker's male characters through the lens of social determinism, while others, including Henry Louis Gates Jr., have studied the "womanist" foundations of Walker's later work. As for Grange Copeland, critics often debate the merits of Grange's "third life." However, there is a fundamental need to complement this scholarship with psychoanalytic and pedagogical perspectives. Marianne Hirsch's theories on postmemory - "the 'generation after' bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before" - provide a vital link in understanding how Ruth processes a history she did not fully inhabit but cannot escape.

The research reveals that much of the existing scholarship on Walker's novel centers on the "redemption" of Grange Copeland or the "moral decline" of Brownfield as a critique of the Jim Crow South. Ruth's internal development and evolution are not explored and Ruth herself is unfortunately relegated to the status of minor character symbolizing hope. Therefore, scholarship fails to foreground the specific psychological trauma that Ruth is subjected to. The problem lies in the parallel between her survival, autonomy, and quest for selfhood. It is undeniable that Grange is the architect of her resilience and assertiveness, but is she really and plainly liberated, or is she being used by Grange as a vessel for his redemption? This raises a fundamental question. This paper intends to analyze how Ruth's psychology is fractured and how she navigates between the traumatic witness of her mother's murder and the "decolonizing" education that Grange lavishes on her.

The main purpose of this article is to lay bare the three fundamental phases that shape Ruth's life: the psychological trauma of witnessing her mother's murder, the survival mechanism initiated by Grange through pedagogy, and the burgeoning of adolescence marked by assertiveness, selfhood, and autonomy.

This study utilizes a qualitative methodology anchored in the literary technique of close reading, which consists of meticulously analyzing the text, namely the linguistic nuances, recurring motifs, characters, and their attitudes. Specific attention is paid to the psychological evolution of Ruth. This qualitative approach adopts a tri-lens theoretical framework. First, Post-Maternal Psychoanalysis is employed to analyze the "psychic void" left by the murdered mother and the inherent identity dismantling Ruth undergoes. Second, the study relies on Critical Race Theory to scrutinize the sociopolitical setting of Baker County, where racial hierarchies serve as tools of oppression. Finally, Black Feminist Pedagogy is called upon to follow up Grange's pedagogy, aiming at transforming Ruth. Grange uses the following pedagogical tools: dialogue, critical consciousness, and nurturance, as unconventional education, which functions as a radical act of "decolonization of the soul." As Audre Lorde (1984) argued in *Sister outsider*, "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house." (p. 110) Grange's pedagogic strategy bears fruit precisely because he did not use the "tools" of passive devotion and institutionalized subordination in favor of a grassroots survival strategy.

The data used to elaborate this paper are primary and secondary data. The primary source is the novel *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970) by Alice Walker. Particular attention is given to the graphic descriptions of Mem's and the profound connection between Grange and Ruth. Secondary sources encompass peer-reviewed literary criticism and theoretical texts, including Marianne Hirsch's work on postmemory, bell hooks' theories on Black female recovery and pedagogy, and Judith Herman's foundational work on trauma.

The findings of this paper are split into three different sections serving as a roadmap: The Traumatic Witness, which examines the initial "post-maternal" psychological fragmentation; The Pedagogy of Survival, highlighting Grange's radical mending of Ruth's consciousness; and The Emergence of Autonomy, tracing her final transition into a decolonized, self-actualized adolescent.

SECTION I: THE TRAUMATIC WITNESS—MEM'S MURDER AND THE FRACTURE OF INNOCENCE

In Walker's *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, Ruth's psychological evolution is fueled by a singular, visceral moment of horror: the murder of her mother, Mem, by her father, Brownfield. This event does not merely entail the loss of a parent; it means the complete overwhelming of Ruth's reality. Ruth witnesses her father violently taking her mother's life, this thrusts her into a "post-maternal" psychology where the domestic haven - traditionally a site of nurturance, love and tenderness - becomes a crucible of trauma. This episode is portrayed with graphic and seething precision that marks the disruption of Ruth's childhood innocence:

> What happened after that Ruth did not know, and now she did not want to know. She buried her face in the pillow and began to whimper. Why had her mother walked on after she saw the gun? That's what she couldn't understand. Could she have run away or not? But Mem had not even slowed her steps as she approached her husband. After her first cheerful, tired greeting she had not even said a word, and her bloody repose had struck them instantly as a grotesque attitude of profound, inevitable rest. (p. 123)

The allegoric description of Mem's "bloody repose" and her "inevitable rest" illustrates a martyrial undertone to her death, one that Ruth must struggle with as she attempts to figure out why her mother did not try to escape. This cold death marks the end of Ruth's primary world. Scholar Marianne Hirsch (1989), in her work *The Mother/Daughter Plot*: *Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism* notes that the "shattering of the mother-child bond through violence creates a psychic void that the child must fill with the labor of remembrance and survival.," (P. 147) Ruth is haunted by the horrific visual of her mother "lying faceless among a scattering of gravel in a pool of blood," where her head is surrounded by "bright yellow oranges" that "glistened... like a halo." (P. 122) This "halo" of oranges represents an irony that transforms a symbol of maternal caregiving into a

funereal scene. Ruth realizes that this horrific scene of her mother's death means the evaporation of a protective figure and a magical world. Walker narrates:

> When Ruth struggled sleepily to open her eyes the morning of her first day at Grange's house... Without rustling the covers or making any sounds of being awake, she began to remember. The night before had been Christmas Eve. Ruth had been going to get a tricycle for Christmas, or she had thought she was... [she realized] there really was no Santa Claus. She was Santa Claus. Mem. (p. 116)

In this passage, we perceive Ruth, on Christmas morning, awakening to the bleak realities of the vacuum left in her existence. At first, she was supposed to receive a gift, but later, she comes to the conclusion that she herself was the Santa Claus she was expecting. She undergoes an intense transformation and a critical move from childhood candor to the heavy burden of responsibility.

After Mem's murder, Ruth finds herself endowed with maternal responsibility to perpetuate her mother's legacy, with paternal violence still looming over her head. This absence has left a profound void in her life, shaping her psychology. In the same dynamic, bell hooks posits in *Sisters of the Yam* that for Black girls who witness domestic trauma, "the act of seeing is an act of losing; they lose the mother as protector and must become their own guardians" (p. 62). Ruth's shift from a child expecting a tricycle to a "bearer of her mother's legacy" would drastically shape her third life with Grange.

SECTION II: LEARNING SURVIVAL—GRANGE'S UNCONVENTIONAL PEDAGOGY OF PROTECTION AND SPIRITUAL RESISTANCE

Following the traumatic episode that overwhelms Ruth's innocence, her grandfather, Grange, engages in a radical mission to help his granddaughter's psychological reconstruction. Grange rejects the conventional approaches of child-rearing; he adopts a spiritual and intellectual parenting to construct a "survival mechanism" for Ruth, who remains vulnerable to the constant threat of systemic and domestic violence. With this unconventional approach, Grange does not merely aim to physically protect her; he attempts to raise her critical consciousness and sense of self-worth that would resist the outside world's assault.

In this process of reconstruction, Grange erected a "sacred playspace" for Ruth – a small log cabin built specially for Ruth. This cabin illustrates a physical and symbolic sanctuary; a place Ruth can call her own and express her agency over this environment. This place means a lot to Ruth; it is essential to her identity because she refers to it as hers, despite the fact that it is located within Josie's house. Walker describes, "She hated getting up in the morning, especially when she woke up in the house: "Josie's house," she called it, instead of in the cabin, which she considered hers and Grange's, but mostly hers." (P. 179) This careful ostracism is meant to shield her and nurture the formation of her inner self before confronting the violent realities of Baker County.

Grange's spiritual and intellectual parenting further nurtures this inner self by raising healthy skepticism against oppressive institutions. In a notable departure from conventional piety, Grange shares stories that model the capacity for irreverence and intellectual rebellion. Walker depicts:

> For how could any God with self-respect, he wanted to know, bargain with a boy of seven or eight, who proposed such a nasty deal and meal. During the latter part of the story Ruth bounced in her chair with laughter. And when she and Grange sat in church together they quite often giggled like silly girls over their own conventional absurdities, one of which was going to church. To preachers and church-going dandies alike, they were the dreaded incarnation of blasphemy. (P. 133)

This "blasphemy" serves as a survival strategy. Grange teaches Ruth how to question the absolute authority of the church and arms her with other tools to interrogate other hierarchies of power. His instruction, far from being abstract, is grounded in factual and concrete experiences he gained with time. At one point, he tells her: "Before you let 'em baptize you in they muddy creeks an' waterholes… you kick the legs out from under 'em and leave 'em drown." (P. 194) This bold and blasphemous warning deconstructs baptism, the symbol of spiritual rebirth, as a potential act of subjugation. Grange uses a language that is deliberately irreverent and provocative. He teaches Ruth to protect the integrity of her body and spirit against a society that hides behind religious claims to exert control and subjugation. Therefore, Grange instills moral strength in Ruth to resist the manipulatory gestures of religious authority.

Grange's pedagogy aligns well with what bell hooks (1994) describes as the necessity of recognizing how we are socialized into "blind spots" shaped by race, gender, and class. Grange constantly urges Ruth to "look underneath revealed truth," and teaches her not to rely on inherited assumptions, but rather to internalize them. His refusal to abide by pious deacons or sentimental sermons reframes the intellectual posture that Ruth

can embody. She learned early on that blind reverence without deep critique is dangerous. The key to survival in this hostile environment is to look beneath what the mainstream holds as a sacred truth.

Grange's religious principles ignore a God that requires submission in favor of the spiritual depth found in companionship and mutual joy. His faith, if he has one, lies in dancing, storytelling, shared laughter, and the unconditional protection of a child's dignity. Patricia Hill Collins (1990), in *Black Feminist Thought*, develops the concept of community "othermothering" to describe caregiving practices that create emotionally sustaining networks and relatively safe spaces necessary for resistance within oppressive environments where men or women who are not biological parents provide the necessary emotional and psychological support to survive oppressive environments. By erecting the log cabin, Grange protects her against the world's cruelties, thus serving as the essential "othermother."

This instruction on power dynamics aligns with Grange's teachings on racial consciousness. In a strategy of deliberate observation, Grange and Ruth hide behind bushes to inspect some white people for Ruth's further education. Walker says:

> Ruth and Grange lay concealed behind some bushes on their side of the fence. It was Grange's idea that they inspect some "white people" for Ruth's further education. What Ruth noticed was that they were not exactly white, not like a refrigerator, but rather a combination of gray and yellow and pink, with the youngest ones being the pinkest. (p. 177)

During these moments, Grange teaches her to see racial identity not as something natural, but as a constructed human deed and often as an absurd way to express one's superiority. He challenges the "rumor... that they is peoples" and urges her to see them with a careful, detached eye: Ruth replies that they are "not exactly white... but rather a combination of gray and yellow and pink." This new discovery about white men changes her way of perceiving the oppressor.

Finally, Ruth develops a survival consciousness through her quotidian companionship with Grange, which shapes her daily life. Their interdependence and deep connection are woven into simple, shared experiences:

> She and Grange had their breakfast, oatmeal and wine for him, oatmeal and milk for her. Then they walked along the highway to the school. The school was only about half a mile from their house, even nearer through the woods, and they could walk it in a few minutes. (P. 179)

These routine activities - the shared oatmeal, the walks through the woods, the evenings spent "gossiping and shelling" peas – establish a peaceful, serene, and relational atmosphere that replaces her traumatic experience. For Ruth, survival is not about facing everyday grief, but rather a shared act of living that Grange protects with all his might, ensuring that she grows up psychologically strong and assertive with full agency.

SECTION III: POST-MATERNAL PSYCHOLOGY—IDENTITY FRAGMENTATION, PATERNAL AMBIVALENCE, AND THE EMERGENCE OF AUTONOMOUS SELFHOOD

Ruth psychological experience evolves and takes on the form of "unresolved tension" as she grows up. She is caught between the subsequent trauma of her mother's death and the overprotectiveness and devotion of her grandfather. She undergoes profound and thorough fragmentation of her identity. She finds herself obliged to juggle the "ghost" of her mother and the presence of two men who shape her world: Grange, her protector, and Brownfield, her mother's murderer.

Ruth's relationship with Brownfield is paradoxical marked by a "great conundrum," where she feels biologically attracted to him and at the same time harbors a deep aversion towards him. Ruth perceives Brownfield as a cruel and abominable figure from the past, inextricably linked to her history. She is aware that "the older Grange got the more serene and flatly sure of his mission he became' (p. 194), but she also realizes that this mission–her survival–arises out of Grange's own well-established guilt. As psychoanalyst Judith Herman (1992) observes in *Trauma and Recovery*, the child of a perpetrator often experiences "fragmented loyalty," where the need for a father figure clashes violently with the knowledge of his crimes. Ruth is subjected to this situation. She "always felt older than Grange when he was feeling bad," (p. 137) acting as the emotional anchor for a man whose own "crimes...were never aimed at anyone but himself". (p. 137)

The redemptive momentum of Grange triggers a profound psychological dependency. Ruth's room is a "veritable sun of brightness," combined with the "beautiful in rugs, curtains, pictures" that she and Grange

carefully put together to dispel the darkness of their shared tribulations. This shows the extent to which her intellectual world is equally well shielded by her savior, Grange:

> Her desk, facing the woods, was littered with books. She liked mythology, the Brontë sisters, Thomas Hardy, any romantic writer. If she had been shipwrecked on a deserted island she would have taken Jane Eyre, a pocket thesaurus she had, all her books about Africa. She would have taken her maps of the continents, everything she owned by Charles Dickens, plenty of paper and a stock of pencils. (p.193)

These books she fondly owns offer her an extensive vocabulary for "autonomous desire" and "spiritual resistance," and they also underscore the isolation of her existence deliberately imposed by Grange. Her "post-maternal" survivalism is profoundly marked by joyful and recreative moments enjoyed within the bounds of Grange's protection. Nonetheless, the "threat of forced separation" from him still looms over her head. This autonomy and peaceful moment shared with her grandfather is fragile because Brownfield is adamant about getting her back. He legally attempts to reclaim her. At the court, the judge inquires if she wants to be with her "real daddy," she replies "No, sir" with all her might, which signals not only a rejection of Brownfield, but a desperate attempt to maintain the psychological containment Grange has built for her.

The rise of her true identity is most visible when the outside world finally "moves in" on her. Her encounter with young activists from the Movement entails "new emotions of jealousy and attraction" which Grange's protection cannot prevent. Seeing a young man with "shapely lips" and a burgeoning beard, Ruth experiences a "shy but bubbly delighted laugh". Grange, watching this, ponders:

> Grange looked over at Ruth. She was standing at the edge of the porch with one arm around a roof support. Her eyes were shining! He could almost feel the hot current that flowed through her, making her soft young body taut and electric with waiting. He would not have admitted that he was slightly shocked, but he was. (p. 228)

This "hot current" she feels underscores the birth of a new self that exists outside of inherited trauma. It is a moment that signals a disruption. Ruth stops being just a "witness" or a "survivor" and turns into a woman with her own desires. As Toni Morrison (1987) observes in *Beloved*, "Freeing yourself was one thing, claiming ownership of that freed self was another" (p. 111). Grange's protection is successful at "freeing" Ruth from the immediate cycle of paternal violence, but her engagement and connection with the young activists paves the way for the beginning of her claiming "ownership" of that "freed self" - a move from a protected and carefully nurtured one to an autonomous, assertive, and empowered subject of her own destiny.

Essentially, the architecture of Ruth's psychology is deeply shaped by the "unresolved tension" between her past and her future. As Frantz Fanon (2004) suggests in *The Wretched of the Earth*, the decolonization of the individual soul necessitates a radical movement beyond protective psychological structures forged in the furnace of past trauma. Ruth's journey ends not in total self-fulfillment, but in a state of "fragile autonomy." As she faces the courtroom and her father's "greedy staring," she is left with the "tea of survival" as she said in the book, and a "mind behind the eyes" that is finally, irrevocably, in flight toward her own future.

II. CONCLUSION

The psychological tribulations Ruth went through signal a compelling testimony to the resilience of the human spirit in the face of traumatic horror. This study aimed to examine how a child whose psyche is disrupted by witnessing maternal murder can rebuild an assertive self without reproducing her predecessors' traumas or redemptions. By examining Ruth not as a passive symbol of hope but as a complex psychological subject, this analysis has highlighted the constant tension between inherited paternal violence and the necessity of self-definition.

The findings reveal that Ruth's reconstruction depends heavily on the "pedagogy of survival" advocated by Grange Copeland. Our data, drawn from rigorous and meticulous textual analysis and close reading, indicate that this education is both protective and revolutionary. Grange genuinely transforms the home into a "sacred playspace" and awakens Ruth to a critical consciousness of a racialized and oppressive world. In so doing, he helps Ruth go beyond this traumatic experience and start a fresh and conscious adolescent life. The analysis proves that Ruth's autonomy arises precisely when she successfully fills the "psychic void" left by Mem with personal desire and intellectual curiosity.

The scientific and groundbreaking contribution of this article lies in the combination of post-maternal psychoanalysis, critical race theory and Black feminist pedagogy to Walker's work. This study shifts the critical

focus from Grange's redemptive figure to Ruth's internal transformation and maturation. Therefore, it enriches the understanding of intergenerational trauma and cognitive resistance strategies in African-American literature.

However, this study has some limitations. First, this analysis focuses only on a single novel by Walker, which restricts the scope of the findings to a specific work of fiction with no possibility of generalizing these psychological patterns to real-world sociological contexts. Second, the focus on the Ruth-Grange may have overshadowed other peripheral community influences and interactions within the novel.

Finally, research perspectives could take the form of a comparative study of the "survivor daughter" figure in the works of other contemporary authors, such as Toni Morrison or Maya Angelou. It would be pertinent and insightful to investigate whether protective structures (like Ruth's cabin) constitute a recurring and meaningful motif in the formation of an autonomous Black female identity within the context of Southern American literature.

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