Abstract

Racism and sexism are dominant themes in African-American literature. Hence, this review identify how African Americans in Alice Walker’s *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* and *Meridian* are segregated based on their color and sex and the effects of the discrimination. In order to analyze the two related themes, the plots, the setting, and the characters of the novels are descriptively examined. This review establishes that Walker chooses her settings and characters appropriately to portray the effects of racism and sexism on African Americans. However, the reactions of the African American characters to racism and sexism differ: whereas the Copelands fail to fight against the injustice of the white supremacists thereby leading to their family tragedy, Meridian and her fellow activists struggle and fight against the white unjust system.

**Keywords:** Alice Walker, African-American Literature, racism, sexism, Civil Rights Movement, struggle, tragedy
**Introduction**

Literary works are influenced by issues that occur in their milieus. In other words, literature is not just a mere compilation of words. It is a product of society for the sake of the people. In African-American literature, writers have been occupied by such issues as racism and sexism. Therefore, in African-American literature, there are many writers whose works were used to address such issues. Writers in this category include Richard Wright, Lorraine Hansberry, Langston Hugh, Alice Walker, etc.

According to Bajilisama, racism is a ‘belief or ideology that all members of each race possesses characteristics or abilities specific to that race, that distinguish it as superior or inferior to another race or races. It is also the prejudices directed against someone of a different race based on such a belief (35). In other words, racism is unfair treatment of a people based on their color, origin, etc. For instance, in the USA, color was and (is still to some extent) a manifest way of showing racism. The white Americans discriminate against the black Americans based on the latter’s color. In African American literature, one of the effects of racism is sexism.

**Sexism.** prejudice or discrimination based on sex or gender, especially against women and girls (Masequesmay, n.p.). In other words, sexism is an unfair treatment against the female folks. Sexism leads to ‘perilous, sometimes embittered and brutal relationship between black men and women’ (Watkins, n.p.). Padhi adds that

> The tragedy of African-American women comes from racial segregation which is the result of long term slavery. Also it stems from gender discrimination. They had to live with the tortures of gender discrimination perpetrated by not only white men but also men of same race. As a Black she has had to endure all the horrors of slavery and, living in a
racist society as a worker, she has been the object of continual exploitation, occupying the lowest place on the wage scale and restricted to the most demeaning and uncreative jobs (38).

Sexism is not only perpetrated by the white men against black women; it is also carried by black American men against their female counterparts. However, sexism in African-American literature is usually a direct or indirect consequence of white racism. With sexism, ‘black womanhood has been destroyed, distorted, dismantled and abused with racial, sexual and inhuman practices by black men and white men and women’ (Padhi, 38). Consequent upon the menace of injustice of racism and sexism in African-American literature, this review is done to identify how African Americans in Alice Walker’s *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* and *Meridian* are segregated based on their color and sex and the effects of the discrimination.

**Synopsis of *The Third Life of Grange Copeland***

The plot revolves around the characters of Grange, his wife (Margaret), Brownfield (their child), Brownfield’s lover, (Mem), and their child, Ruth. Grange and Brownfield labor as poor tenant farmers. Therefore, the father cannot meet up with the obligations to enhance his son’s life.

To complicate issues for Grange, Margaret has sexual relations with a white man called Shipley. Out of shame, Grange abandons his family and travels to the North. On his part, Brownfield keeps sexual relations with open whores.

Frustrated, Margaret harms her youngster and commits suicide. Brownfield marries a whore called Mem. But the couple fight frequently. Therefore, one day, Brownfield he kills Mem. She leaves her three little girls, Ornette, Daphene and Ruth behind.
But when Grange comes back to Georgia, he takes Ruth’s guardianship. Brownfield sues him to get his daughter back. In the fight between them, Grange murders his son, Brownfield.

**Synopsis of *Meridian***

Meridian Hill is a young black woman who gets pregnant in high school and has a short-lived marriage with her child’s father, Eddie. She joins the Civil Rights Movement and abandons her son to go to college. She travels to small, poor, black areas of the South, registering black American voters and fighting injustices. It is when she joins the movement that she meets Truman Held, a pretentious, French-speaking activist. Meridian falls in love with Truman.

But her relationship with Truman is also stressful, since he begins dating white exchange students. Truman and Meridian finally have sex, but Truman leaves her. Meridian becomes pregnant and undergoes a painful and shaming abortion. The abortion leads to physical symptoms like blindness and paralysis that are manifestations of her stress and conflict.

Truman marries Lynne, who is a Jewish exchange student. But the movement turns angrier against whites. Truman's friend is shot for being seen with a white woman. He survives the shooting, but he rapes Lynne in anger. Lynne is traumatized. She gets pregnant by Truman and has a child, Camara. But Camara is beaten to death in a hate crime.

Later, Truman joins Meridian in the South to work with poor black families. She heals herself, working through her conflicts with violence and justice, and leaves, but Truman takes her place. He needs to work through his own healing.
Contextualizing Racism and Sexism in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* and *Meridian*

In *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, Walker showcases the evil effects of racism and sexism. In order to support this assertion, let’s look at how Walker crafts the plots, the setting, and the characters of the two novels to buttress the effects of racism on African Americans.

The settings of the two novels help to bring the issues of racism and sexism to the forefront. The novels are set in the South: the heart of racism in the annals of America’s history. For instance, in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, the setting is a plantation in Georgia. In other words, Walker deliberately chooses the plantation to take us back to the history of the black Americans. It suffices to say that the setting is symbolic. The plantation setting symbolizes racism. The racism embedded in the setting is graphically described by Hasanthi as follows:

> The then plantation system in America bestowed untreatable wounds on the psychological and emotional planes upon individuals involved in sharecropping. Generations of blacks could not find a way out of the rut and rammel like system, that ate away the vitality of umpteen number of African Americans. The dehumanizing aspects of sharecropping under racism have been clearly stated by Walker through the novel. Doing so, she has shown how blacks have been undone under white hegemony for generations together (23).

From Hasanthi’s opinion, the effects of racism on African Americans are historical, psychological and physical. On the historical background, we think about the wounds of the middle passage; the psychological dimension reminds us of the trauma the African American slaves and their descendants face; while the physical aspects bring to the fore the segregation meted out on the African Americans why the white American supremacists.
Just like *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, *Meridian* setting is still in the South. Meridian and her fellow African American characters face untold subjugation, maltreatment, and injustice.

To further buttress racism and sexism, Walker deliberately uses unique characterization. We have white American supremacists and African American victims. In *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, for instance, the racist white land proprietors subject African American tenant farmers to work in the fields with their families. To worsen their predicaments, the white supremacists give the subjugated black sharecroppers other stringent measures: ‘They ought not to show interest in the wages. They ought to stay on the land for the entire year with no strike’ (Abood, 323).

Walker uses the Copelands to portray the injustice of racism. The Copelands are under subjugation. We see how Grange and Brownfield are persecuted by the white men. In *Meridian*, the same black-white polar characterization holds sway. The black American characters such as Meridian, her mother, Truman, and others are paired against the white racists. We can see racism at work when Truman's friend is shot by white supremacists for no just reason; when Camara is beaten to death in a hate crime; etc.

The effect of this subjugation is sexism. The men turn their disappointment on their ladies. For instance, Grange beats his wife, Margaret. He has also an extramarital affair with a prostitute called Josie. The African American females become casualties of verbal, physical, mental and psychological mistreatment. In the end, the Copelands end up in tragedy. In *Meridian*, we see instances of sexism in the characters of Meridian, Lynne, etc. For instance, Eddie abandons Meridian after impregnating her; Truman’s friend rapes Lynne because a white man shoots at him, not because Lynne offends him. That action resonates with the assertion that ‘black men
have become their enemies and oppressors [of the black women thereby leading to] conflict between black men and black women in the two novels (Rodríguez 4).

Conclusion

This review is carried out to compare the two novels written Alice Walker. We argue that the two works share some similarities that border on racism and sexism. In other words, the African American characters suffer racism and sexism perpetrated by the white American characters. Though the effects of racism and sexism on the African American characters are the same, the attitude and reactions of the African American characters to racism and sexism differ.
Works Cited


