

Melancholic Mem in *the Third Life of Grange Copeland*

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ABSTRACT

Julia Kristeva's notion of the melancholic subject deals with the subject's sense of loss in the absence of the unnameable Thing. As a result of melancholia, the melancholic subject is a stranger to his mother tongue and cannot express his feelings through language; therefore, he cannot communicate with others. Using this framework, this article focuses on Alice Walker's *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* in light of Julia Kristeva's melancholic subject. In this novel, Mem is tormented, both physically and psychologically, by her husband. As a result of her loss of a mother figure and husband's affection, she falls into melancholia. This article sheds light on how Mem's loss of a mother figure and lack of love from her husband leads her to melancholia and how she reacts to the physical and psychological pressures she must confront.

Keywords: Julia Kristeva, melancholic subject, Alice Walker, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, sense of loss

INTRODUCTION

The Third Life of Grange Copeland (1970) highlights black characters' entrapment in a racist society. Racism influences the male characters both physically and

psychologically, and as a result of racial pressure, the male characters' relationships with their wives and children fail. As these black men are marginalised in society and are supposed to obey their white masters, they in turn impose these pressures on their family members; therefore, family relationships become distorted. "Walker centers on the male characters' distorted identity due to socioeconomic discomfort coupled with racial underpinnings" (Lare-Assogba, 2011, p. 38). In this novel,

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“Brownfield is a terrifying example of how the south can physically enslave and spiritually cripple black people” (Butler, 1988, p. 196). Moreover, this novel portrays how in those moments when “the black man is bruised and dehumanized by the dominant and social structure, he, in turn, maims and beats his wife, who is loyal and submissive, and mistreats his children” (Hogue, 1985, p. 56). Moreover, this novel is also an escapist novel, as men seek respite from their dependence on white landlords and women want to escape abusive husbands and fathers (Pifer, 1998, p. 21).

To demonstrate his power, Brownfield, the black male character, starts to question the female characters’ capabilities and, step by step, begins to belittle his wife. Alice Walker believes that although this novel centres on Grange and his son, “it is the women and how they are treated that colors everything” (O’Brian, 1973, p. 197). This novel indicates women’s struggle for “self-determination economically, intellectually and artistically among the African-American women characters and their control over the male that actually dominates the novel” (Hall, 1990, p. 14). The following discussion will focus on Mem, one of the repressed female characters in the novel, who is tormented, both physically and psychologically, by her husband, Brownfield. As a result of this physical and mental pressure, Mem, an educated, pretty and confident woman, turns into an ordinary person reduced to skin and bones, prone to question herself. The following discussion will apply Julia

Kristeva’s concept of the melancholic subject to *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* in order to explore Mem’s melancholia.

MELANCHOLIA

Language and identity have been main topics of research in recent years. Different critics, such as Foucault (1990), Derrida (1998) and Kristeva (1984), have focused on language and its effect on identity formation, which is the main objective of psychoanalysis. In some cases, however, the subject is unable to form her identity as the result of a feeling of loss within herself. Throughout life, a person can undergo various losses, but the main question is what has been lost, and thus different critics in various fields have studied this mourning that leads to problems with identity formation. The reason for this sense of loss is melancholia. It has been studied from a range of different perspectives, including Freudian psychoanalysis, Aristotelian philosophy and Kristevan literature. But why does this topic fascinate so many great minds and, moreover, why have so many texts been devoted to it? From ancient times to the modern era, different philosophers, literary figures and psychoanalysts have devoted much of their time to discussing melancholia and its causes. What I try to show in the following pages is how to apply Julia Kristeva’s concept of the melancholic subject to Walker’s *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*.

As aforementioned, throughout the long history of the study of melancholia,

melancholia has been variously presented and widely disputed in its degree of seriousness and level of importance. The earliest critical discussions concerning melancholia can be traced back to before the nineteenth century, when different philosophers viewed melancholia as depression, a state of insanity or a mental disorder. In the beginning, some critics like Avicenna and Galen considered melancholia to be an imbalance of black bile (Radden, ix, x). In addition, Teresa of Avila considered it to be the devil's work, rather than a form of mental distress (Radden, 9). Not only demonic forces but also astrological effects have been regarded as the cause of melancholia. The people who believed in astrological influence thought that a child who was born under the influence of the planet Saturn would be prone to melancholia. Although the causes of melancholia vary depending on different philosophers' perspectives, there are two main states of fear and sadness that all definitions of melancholia share and see as symptoms.

In addition to the above, based on Aristotle's *Problems*, melancholia is often associated with an intellectual and creative mind (Kristeva, 1992, 6-7). Therefore, a genius is more susceptible to melancholia. In the view of other philosophers like Benjamin Rush, it is better for people to keep themselves busy and active in order not to become melancholic. One should, however, notice that there is a difference between being active and labouring under

meaningless oppression; as such, more women have fallen into melancholia as they do not have meaningful work but have rather been oppressed by the social system.

Later, Sigmund Freud offered his explanation of the melancholic subject in *Mourning and Melancholia* (1917). Based on Freud's ideas, mourning and melancholia result from loss. The melancholic subject feels a sense of loss towards something to which they have libidinal attachment. Mourning and melancholia are considered to be a response to loss, but while mourning is a normal response, and it ends after a period, melancholia is abnormal as it does not have a specific time duration. As a result, the mourning person is able to make progress in life after mourning their loss. During mourning, the subject goes through a process of ego formation, whereas in melancholia the subject cannot exist and lives in a state of psychological stagnation. Freud defines melancholia as "an object-choice, an attachment of the libido to a particular person, [who] at one time existed", but this object-relationship is broken and as a result the subject faces a loss of ego (Freud 249).

Julia Kristeva, when discussing the melancholic subject, is influenced by Freud's theory of loss (1917). In her theory, she focuses on self-identity and the connection between narcissism and melancholia. Kristeva mentions that she will "speak of depression and melancholia without always distinguishing the particularities of the two ailments but keeping in mind their common structure"

(Kristeva, 1980, 10–11). Moreover, she claims that depression is the hidden “face of narcissus, the face that is to bear him away into death, but of which he is unaware while he admires himself in mirage” (ibid., 5). In fact, Kristeva believes that melancholia is both a self-identity disorder and a sense of loss.

[An] abyss of sorrow, a noncommunicable grief that at times, and often on a long-term basis, lays claims upon us to the extent of having us lose all interest in words, actions, and even life itself. (Kristeva, 1980, 3)

When a child mourns for the loss of the Thing, he cannot use language and, as Kristeva holds, “the collapse of the symbolic is a tell-tale sign of melancholia” (Sabo, 2010, p. 57). In the absence of the Thing, he feels loss and cannot share this feeling with others. The melancholic subject expresses how “‘I’ isolate myself from the world, ‘I’ withdraw into my sadness, ‘I’ do not speak, ‘I’ cry. ‘I’ kill myself” (Kristeva, 2000, 47). Even though the melancholic subject speaks, he is a stranger to his mother tongue. In Kristeva’s words, “the depressed speak of nothing, they have nothing to speak of: glued to the Thing, they are without objects” (Kristeva, 1980, 51). The melancholic subject’s sentences are ungrammatical, repetitious and monotonous. The melancholic subject can bring his mother back through the use of language; and if the child cannot enter the symbolic realm, he will have a heterogeneous subjectivity rather than a unified one.

As a result, he becomes an “I” through language. In fact, a traumatic separation from object of love is the necessary foundation of human identity. As a product of individuation, this crisis is in essence individual and is therefore timeless and unrecorded in the history. (Iannetta, 2002, pp. 194–195)

The melancholic writer attempts to enter the symbolic realm and name the lost object that he mourns; and as a result of this naming he is able to share his sense of loss with other people and express his sadness. However, Kristeva holds that the writer should have experience of loss in order to be able to express it in his writing. Only the melancholic subject who has experienced melancholia can reflect it in her text; and Alice Walker, as her biography shows, is a melancholic subject. During her childhood, Walker played with her brothers and, on one occasion, one of them accidentally shot her in the eye and she was blinded in it. She thought that she had become ugly with the scar on her face; therefore, she hid herself from other people and could not communicate with them. Alice Walker herself admits that:

I have always been a solitary person and since I was eight years old (and victim of traumatic accident that blinded and scarred one eye), I have day dreamed – not of fairy tales – but of falling on swords, of putting guns to my head or heart, and of slashing my wrists with a razor. For a long time I thought I was ugly and disfigured ... I believe, though

that it was from this period – from my solitary, lonely position, the position of an outcast – that I began really to see people and things, really to notice relationships and to learn to be patient enough to care about how they turned out. (Robinson, 2009, p. 295)

From then on, she started reading stories and writing poetry. After graduating from high school, having earned a scholarship, she went to Spelman College. At college, she unwittingly became pregnant, and this led to depression. As a result, she considered committing suicide; however, her friends found a doctor who did an abortion for her and saved her life. In 1965, in Mississippi, she met Melvyn Rosena Leventhan, a Jewish lawyer, and two years later they married. Their marriage surprised people as it was the first legal inter-racial marriage in Mississippi. However, in 1976, they divorced amicably. The divorce and so many other bitter events influenced Walker so much so that “she became suicidal”, and in fact, “she struggled with the thought of killing herself throughout the years, but writing became a way for Walker to heal herself” (Robinson, 2009, p.295).

She writes about her trauma within her texts in order to heal herself, and *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* is one of the texts in which she highlights her trauma. *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* has been analysed from different perspectives, such as Stephanie La’Chelle Hall’s master’s thesis, *African-American Women and Their Endeavor for Self-Determination in Alice Walker’s Novels*, “*The Third Life of Grange*

Copeland”, “*Meridian*”, and “*The Color Purple*”, which reveals how women intend to gain self-determination. Alice Walker’s female characters fight for their economic, intellectual and artistic rights, and in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, these female characters’ “control over the male actually dominates the novel” (14). Hall’s dissertation focuses on Alice Walker’s *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* and *The Color Purple*. She applies Barbara Christian and Mari Evans’ feminist theories to these texts in order to indicate the methods via which women achieve self-determination in a patriarchal society. This study is, however, limited in that it does not focus on women’s psychological problems and their methods to address these problems and then find a voice to fight for their rights. My study aims to fill the gaps in Hall’s dissertation (1990).

Moreover, Linda Elena Opyr in her doctoral thesis *The Black Woman in the Novels of Alice Walker and Toni Morrison* explores the depiction of black women in selected novels by those writers. She emphasises the influence of racial and gender discrimination on black female characters. Moreover, she focuses on how black women’s relationships with other characters can influence those women. Walker’s female characters struggle for their physical and psychological survival (36). Opyr selected Alice Walker’s *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, *Meridian* and *The Color Purple* to indicate the influence of discrimination on the black female characters. Opyr tries to show that

black women are under pressure within both black and white communities. But she does not focus on their melancholia, which is the topic of the current paper.

Melissa Sue Smoak in her master's thesis *The Melancholic Subject: Exploring Loss and Relationships in African American and Asian American Fiction* (2014) focuses on how oppression contributes to characters' psychological problems. One of the selected novels is Walker's *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*. In her master's thesis, Smoak mainly focuses on the effect of racism on black characters and how they see themselves. Smoak applies Freud's theory of mourning and melancholia to focus on the characters' melancholia.

In a similar work, Leigh Anne Duck focuses on melancholia in her article entitled "Listening to melancholia: Alice Walker's *Meridian*". Duck also addresses the issue of racism, its effects and approaches to overcome it. This article indicates how characters question their past and learn from their painful experiences. As far as the literature review is concerned, most previous studies on Alice Walker's novels have focused on racism as the main reason for characters' melancholy. But the current article will focus on how different losses affect Mem and lead her to melancholia. As Mem loses different things in her life, she undergoes melancholia; however, one should notice that patriarchy and racism exacerbate her situation.

The term patriarchy originates from a Greek word meaning "father of the race". When the male head of a family rules over

the family or overall power is in men's hands, one can refer to this as patriarchy. In the selected novel, Mem's spirit is crushed by Brownfield's treatment of her.

In addition to patriarchy, Mem's psyche is shattered as racism dominates the society. Racism occurs when different races are ranked as superior and inferior to each other. In this novel, the whites consider themselves superior to the blacks. The blacks work in sharecropping fields, and they are slaves. Mem and her children are workers in the fields, they suffer a lot and earn little. In the following, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* will be analysed in light of Julia Kristeva's concept of the melancholic subject in order to explore Mem's melancholia mainly based on the different losses she faces.

DISCUSSION

In *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, Walker mainly discusses the effects of racism on black people and how it leads them into melancholia. The following discussion will examine how Brownfield has melancholic moods, not only as a result of his father's abandonment of the family but also as the effect of a white racist society, and how he seeks to put all these pressures onto Mem's shoulders, which leads to her melancholia.

Brownfield's narrative concentrates all that is negative about southern culture: he is cruelly victimized by the extreme racism and portrayal of the Georgia backwoods world in which he is born and raised. As his name clearly

suggests, his is a case of blighted growth; he is a person who has been physically and emotionally withered by the nearly pathological environment which surrounds him. (Butler, 1988, p. 196)

Brownfield suffers in white racist society as a result of the whites' unjust and belittling behaviour. He could not mature as a man as he did not have any father figure to follow, and because the white racist society emasculated him. Therefore, his life is affected by the negative effects of white racist segregation and sharecropping. As he feels frustrated and powerless in this society, he turns to violence and domination to show his power over his wife and daughters. One should, however, note that the main discussion in this section will deal with Mem's melancholia as a result of her repressed sexuality and inexpressible sense of loss, which will be approached based on Kristeva's melancholic subject. In fact, "within the set of relations established in the texts, we see images of the black woman – as someone who is battered, abused, scared psychologically" (Hogue, 1985, p. 50), and so this study will focus on Mem as one of these battered women.

As aforementioned, in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, Alice Walker emphasises the negative effects of racism on black people's lives. As a result of the inequality between blacks and whites in society, black people cannot achieve their goals. They always dream their dreams, but they never come true. The same frustration with unfulfilled desires affects

Brownfield. "His dreams to go North, to see the world, to give Mem even the smallest things she wanted from life died early" (Walker, 1988, p. 73). Brownfield feels depressed as he perceives there will be no improvement in his life until there is an end to the racist society. Through the pathological environment which surrounds Brownfield, he feels he has withered, both physically and psychologically (Butler, 1988, p. 196). Therefore, he prefers to abandon his dreams, but he feels a lack of fulfilment regarding the dreams in his life, and he mourns this loss.

In addition to racism, Brownfield is melancholic as a result of his father's absence too.

Brownfield felt he had been abandoned by Grange's desertion to whatever wolves would take him; not at the time of his leaving, nor while Brownfield was living at the Dew Drop Inn. (Walker, 1988, p. 93)

Although Grange, Brownfield's father, was a victim of racism too, his bad decision to abandon his family and move north affects all the members of his family psychologically. As Brownfield feels he was abandoned by his father, he always feels this absence in his life. The melancholic subject will ask, "father, why have you deserted me?" (Kristeva, 1980, p. 133), and here Brownfield is a melancholic character who suffers from his father's abandonment. Although he never confesses his need for a father, the memory of his father's abandonment indicates this emotion clearly enough.

After his marriage, as Brownfield cannot support his family in the racist society, he starts to treat his wife and his daughters harshly in order to stop them nagging him about their situation. As a result of this harsh behaviour Mem becomes a melancholic subject. "From a plump woman she became skinny. To Brownfield she didn't look like a woman at all. Even her wonderful breasts dried up and shrank; her hair fell out" (Walker, 1988, p. 77). Through Mem's transformation from plump girl to thin woman, one can perceive the devastating effects of white racism and patriarchy on blacks, especially black women. As a result of racism, Brownfield is dehumanised. He behaves like the animals in the house and hits out at Mem for no reason. That is why Mem changes from a pretty happy woman into a melancholic woman who does not care about her appearance or health. In addition, she cannot talk about her miserable situation to anyone; and, in fact, she does not have anyone to support her in tough situations.

Besides her husband's mistreatment of her, Mem is tired of moving from one place to another.

Each time she stepped into a new place, with its new, and usually bigger rat holes, she wept. Each time she had to clean cow manure out of a room to make it habitable for her children, she looked as if she had been dealt with a blow. Each time she was forced to live in a house that was enclosed in a pasture with cows and animals eager to eat her flowers before they were

planted, she became like a woman walking through a dream, but a woman who had forgotten what it is to wake up. (Walker, 1988, p. 78)

She should clean this new dirty place, which is a kind of nightmare for her, and when she makes the place habitable, she is forced to move out yet again. All these moves torture her throughout her life and stop her enjoying herself. She feels the lack of a permanent home in her life, a place where she can live contentedly with her family. "Women need to feel secure, reassured of love and buttressed by the comfort of home" (Greer, 2008, p. 271), but Mem is deprived of a comfortable house and thus feels depressed. This lack of a permanent place leads her into an "abyss of sorrow, a noncommunicable grief" (Kristeva, 1980, p. 3).

In order to rid herself of this itinerant lifestyle, she finds a house in town; but after a while she loses her job and cannot afford the rent. Then, Brownfield starts bothering her again. Every day she looks for a job, but she cannot find one, and so "the children took their cue from her silence" (Walker 1988, p. 138). Mem keeps silent as she cannot express her helpless hopeless situation. As Mem is a melancholic subject, she "sinks into mutism" (Kristeva, 1980, 43). She cannot share her sense of misery at not finding any sort of job to support her family; she cannot put it into words.

In addition to all her misery, Mem does not receive any support from anyone, as she has even lost the love of her mother, who considered Mem to be her love

opponent. In this bad situation she has no one to help her. "She wanted to leave him, but there was no place to go. She had no one but Josie and Josie despised her" (Walker, 1988, p. 77). She was abandoned by the people she knew. As a melancholic subject, she is unable to express her sense of loss to others, and it is here that Mem's situation is at its worst as she does not have any companion with whom she can talk and unburden her miseries.

In addition to the loss of a mother figure and of the houses she cleaned and took care of for a long time, the loss of not being loved by her husband only worsens Mem's situation. "Loveless marriage is anathema to our culture, and a life without love is unthinkable" (Greer, 2008, p. 222). Mem is trapped within a loveless marriage and does not have anyone to help her escape from this situation. Moreover, Brownfield takes advantage of Mem's physical body to weaken her, and then profits from her weakness. As he cannot provide a comfortable life for his family and Mem can do the things at which he failed, he abuses Mem's body. "Her body would do to her what he could not, without the support of his former bravado. The swelling of the womb, again and again pushing the backbone inward, the belly outward" (Walker, 1988, p. 133). By becoming pregnant time and again, Mem's body becomes weak and she is no longer able to work. Unwanted pregnancies destroy a woman's body and Brownfield inflicts this on Mem in order to degrade and dishearten her. Brownfield even addresses

Mem on this subject and declares, "you thought I fucked you 'cause I wanted it? Josie better than you ever been. Your trouble is you just never learned how not to git pregnant. How long did you think you could keep going with your belly full of childrens?" (Walker, 1988, p. 141). Greer believes that "no men who think really deeply about women retain a high opinion of them; men either despise women or they have never thought seriously about them" (Walker, 1988, p.119). He does not make love to her because he loves her, but he does make her pregnant as he intends to abuse her body. He considers Mem to be a womb and sees just one part of her body; and he seeks to weaken her through her womb, and this thought of being abused by her husband makes Mem melancholic. In fact, the "female body is considered as a sexual object", and here Mem's body is abused by Brownfield (Greer, 2008, p. 17). Moreover, impregnation breaks down a woman's self-sufficiency (Greer, 2008, p. 275), and Mem is unable to work or do the household chores as a result of her pregnancies which weaken her and destroy her self-confidence.

Besides Mem, who is dissatisfied with her house, her daughters "Daphne and Ornette found J. L.'s house unbearable and complained all the time with their eyes" (Walker, 1988, p. 145). They do not express their sense of a lack of comfort in words but their eyes display their melancholia. Although "Ruth was less stricken by the move ... she knew it made her mother unhappy and therefore hated it" (Walker,

1988, p. 145). All the members of the family feel a sense of loss over the comfortable life they had in town when they move to J. L.'s house, but they do not share this feeling as they consider it something private and inexpressible. Even Mem mourns "over losing the 'decent house'" (Walker, 1988, p.148). She mourns the loss of the house as she believes that, in losing a decent house, her daughters have lost a proper and successful future. As soon as they move to J. L.'s house, Brownfield changes from a civilised man into an animal, as he waited for years to torture Mem for renting the house in town without his approval; and as a result, he thinks that Mem questioned his manhood by not consulting him about the house rental.

In the end, as Mem could tolerate no more suffering, she moves towards her husband who holds a gun in his hand. She does not care about dying as she does not have any energy remaining to resist her husband's stubborn animalistic behaviour. In Kristeva's opinion, the melancholic subject does not care about life (Kristeva, 1980, 189); here, for Mem as a melancholic subject, life has lost all meaning in Brownfield's house and so it is not important to her if she loses her life. "Mem's speech progressively loses its strength and resilience, failing ultimately to protect her from the force of the surrounding, environment conditioned largely by Brownfield's willfulness" (O'Mason, 1985, p. 300). "Mem looked up at the porch and called a greeting. It was a cheerful greeting, although she

sounded very tired, tired and out of breath. Brownfield began to curse and came and stood on the steps until Mem got within the circle of the light. Then he aimed the gun with drunken accuracy right into her face and fired" (Walker, 1988, p. 161). Although her behaviour is suicidal, even in the moment of her death she faces it proudly and courageously. The fact is that she was trapped in the wrong marriage. As Brownfield observes the growth of Mem's inner strength, he ends her life.

CONCLUSION

In *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, Alice Walker focuses on how a racist society breaks black people's psyche and affects their family relationships. In this novel, Brownfield torments his wife and daughters as he cannot resist the whites' power. In order to prove his manhood, he puts his family members under pressure, which leads to their melancholia. As a victim of racism and a patriarchal society, Mem loses her life, as she can no longer tolerate any more humiliation in Brownfield's house. She was a happy girl, but she was turned into a melancholic woman trapped in a wrong marriage with Brownfield. She cannot express her sense of loss to anyone, as her husband is harsh and ignorant and she does not have any other support. As life becomes meaningless in her eyes, she commits suicide by moving towards her husband who is holding a gun in his hand, and thus ends her miserable life.

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