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Dismantling Gender Specificity and Establishing Women's Space/Voice: A Womanist Study of Alice Walker's *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*

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Abstract

The paper is a womanist study based on African-American novelist Alice Walker's 1970 novel, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*. The study uses content analysis method, Walker's theory of womanism, and Judith Butler's theory of undoing gender performativity to explore how Walker's women characters dismantle gender specificity and establish women's space/voice. Walker's women characters perceive womanism as a defensive strategy and a healing force as they find it self-healing in restoring their mental health, self-respect, and identity. They do not believe in separation from their male partners; they stand victorious over the racist-sexist society by taking men as partners and by taking their own decisions regarding life and death. Womanism, as their philosophy of life, allows them space for raising voice, forming identity, uplifting status, and finding wholeness of their lives accompanied by men. Their womanist identities reflect a conscious/subversive act of transfiguring differentiation and give them a vision of women's space, a sense of hidden possibilities, and a sense of wholeness. They exercise their sexual freedom which poses a threat to the ideological and political basis of male supremacy. Their womanist performativity questions heteronormativities and stimulates social change. As such, their womanist identities speak more of a political preference than a mere sexual/non-sexual preference. The study explores how Ruth idealizes her womanist foremothers as her role models and takes her grandfather as her partner. She creates women's space/possibilities, weaves her future, and journeys towards wholeness. In fact, she defines herself as one of those possibilities which womanism opens up.

Keywords: Alice Walker, womanism, gender performativity, women's space, wholeness

Alice Walker (1944-), born in a sharecropper's family in Eatonton, Georgia, is one of the leading African-American writers. She is famous for her works which show intersectional experiences of black women in contemporary Americana society. Walker's novels, including *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (henceforth *Third Life*), reveal the struggle of black women for breaking gender-specific internalization and for creating women's space. Walker promotes the concept of womanism for establishing an ideal society wherein women along with their partners (both men and women) would lead their lives openly. Walker's view of womanism is influenced by her literary foremother, Zora Neale

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Hurston, who adopted a womanist idea which was not much known during her age. Hurston's 1937 novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, was infused with womanist notions which are reflected in Walker's novels.

Walker's *Third Life* has been explored from multiple perspectives, such as existentialism, Walker's vision of the South, racial class and gender supremacy to date. However, this study attempts to explore how Walker's women characters dismantle gender specification and foreground their voices and the spaces they occupy. The objective of this study is to explore the possibilities that the concept of womanism helps to open up, including the opening of a new vision, and enriching the readers' understanding of the novel. *Third Life* depicts the picture of three generations of black people in rural Georgia in the South. The three generations include three women characters – Margaret, Mem, and Ruth – from three generations respectively. They represent the predicament of black women from the 1920's to the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement in the1960's.

Distinction between feminism and womanism

The study uses womanist theory which is coined by Walker in *In Search of Our Mothers' Garden: Womanist Prose* (henceforth *In Search).* Walker (1984) sees a womanist as a woman who loves other women, sexually or non-sexually. A womanist appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as a natural counter-balance of laughter), and women's strength. A womanist is a feminist of colour who sometimes loves individual men, sexually or non-sexually. She is not a separatist and is committed to the survival and wholeness of an entire people, male and female. Feminists stand with middle- and upper-class white women and ignore the rights and needs of black women. They are female-centered and consider men as their enemies; whereas womanists consider male counterparts as significant companions in their struggle against an intersectional oppression. A womanist believes that men and women together can attain wholeness. Without the contribution of both men and women, a society is incomplete. Walker admires sensual pleasure and appreciates love for the natural world and all living things. Walker (1984) claims that a womanist loves music, dance, the moon, the spirit, roundness, struggle, the folk, and herself. A womanist believes in love and takes care of everything she loves. Womanists have courage, thirst for knowledge, and love for their surroundings. They do not see love as their weakness; rather, they use it as a way of attributing meaning to life. Phillips (2006) argues that for womanists, community is conceptualized as a series of successively overlapping tiers, beginning with Black women or women of colour (at the level of the self or identity), followed by the Black community and other communities of colour (at the level of "tribe" or "kin"), followed by all oppressed people (at the level of similarly situated others), and ultimately encompassing all humanity (at the universal level). Feminism seeks to empower white women; in contrast, womanism seeks to empower everyone.

Feminism is predominantly a movement of white women. This mainstream white feminism is espoused by white women and is designed to meet their particular needs and exigencies. It works for the welfare of white women and ignores black women's needs and oppression. Feminism addresses gender discriminations which white women face;

whereas, womanism addresses the oppressions that women, irrespective of racial identities, undergo in any situation. The basic difference between these two streams is that feminism focuses on women's social and political empowerment and gender equality; on the contrary, womanism focuses on womanhood and motherhood. To establish an autonomous sexual identity regardless of gender is one of the main grounds of womanism, unlike feminism. As hooks (1982) points out, white feminists draw analogies between "blacks" and "women" and they are yet to acknowledge the overlap between the terms, "blacks" and "women" (that is the existence of black women). By continuously making these analogies, they unwittingly suggest that to them the term "women" is synonymous with "white women" and the term "blacks" is synonymous with "black men" (p. 8). Thus, hooks draws attention to black women's devaluation and exclusion from the mainstream white feminism.

This paper also uses Judith Butler's theory of undoing gender performativity to analyze the doings of the women characters in *Third Life.* Butler (2004) states that two decades ago, gender discrimination applied tacitly to women which no longer serve as the exclusive framework for understanding its contemporary usage. Discrimination against women continues, especially against poor women and women of colour. It is indeed crucial that the dimension of gender discrimination be acknowledged. In this regard, Butler (2004) claims that gender is a kind of doing and that "one does not 'do' one's gender alone. One is always 'doing' with or for another even if the other is only imaginary" (p. 1). By undoing gender, she means "undo[ing] restrictively normative conceptions of sexual and gendered life" (p. 1). Undoing gender is a conscious act of dismantling gender specificity/performativity. This study uses the theoretical tools of womanism and undoing gender performativity to analyze several incidents which take place in the lives of different generations in the novel.

Womanism in *Third Life*

This paper argues that womanism, just like women's solidarity, alleviates trauma-induced mental health issues. Womanism, unlike feminism, nurtures a holistic and integrative approach to life which is committed to attaining wholeness. Men and women need peer support, trusts, and mutual understanding to face oppressive forces prevalent in society. They are supposed to honour each others' views and choices. Walker in *Third Life* shows womanism as a medium by which black women could heal their wounds. A black woman has to go through various humiliating situations, which has an adverse effect on a person's sense of self-respect and takes away a sense of autonomy. Womanism brings back to woman a sense of self and a feeling of the essence of her being. It plays the role of self-healing in the recovery of a woman's mental health. When interconnected issues of gender, race, and class demean her, she finds healing in a womanist way of life.

Phillips (2006) claims that womanism is a process of healing the pain. As she argues,

> Physical healing and methods of reconciling body, mind, and spirit [including integral medicine and folk healing] are also recognized as methods of social transformation by womanists, based on the notion that physical and psychological well-being provide a necessary foundation for social justice and commonweal. (p. xxvi)

Humiliation breaks a woman's physical and mental stability. In such a situation, she needs a platform where she can stand against the obstacles. On the other hand, to bring the wholeness of society, it is necessary to get man as a partner. Womanism, unlike feminism, makes both men and women believe that they are essential parts of the society. If they want to fully live their lives, they have to work with full participation. The idea that men without women are incomplete and vice versa is basic to womanism. Womanism is not radical but rather liberal. Womanists have a positive and holistic approach to life, and they find womanism as a self-healing approach.

Womanism gives a woman an opportunity to be a survivor of racism and sexual violence. From her own healing journey, a womanist understands the importance of surviving and resisting oppression. She copes with distress and recreates her life with self-healing approach and resilience. The women characters in *Third Life* make it obvious that womanist beliefs heal them when they find no one to stand by them. Margaret, wife of Grange Copeland, uses her courage to survive when her husband tortures her both physically and mentally. Earlier, she was unable to make choices about her life and to show her son, Brownfield, any affection. Brownfield observes that "his mother was like their dog in some ways" (Walker, 2005, p. 5). She was submissive at that time; but, later her belief of gaining power (power inherent in black women's ability) makes her beat Grange for his action. It is evident in Brownfield's thinking, "Brownfield blamed his father for his mother's change […]. Depression always gave way to fighting, as if fighting preserved some part of the feeling of being alive" (Walker, 2005, p. 24). Margaret gradually becomes a subversive woman and only listens to herself. Margaret's daughter-in-law (Mem) and Mem's daughter (Ruth) keep their womanist beliefs which heal their souls. Unlike Mem's husband (Brownfield), Mem is not physically powerful; however, she tries to protest with her words which are her immediate weapons.

Walker's womanist vision is reflected through her character portrayal, such as Margaret, Mem, and Ruth in *Third Life*. She portrays the characters as womanists who struggle for gaining self-respect and for creating self-identity. They are aware of themselves and their surroundings. They fight because they do not want to be losers. Their fighting for survival becomes more difficult because they are simultaneously concerned for themselves and for the persons whom they love. This is why they face a vast area of battle with so many obstacles for which sometimes they fail to survive. It finds better expression in character portrayal of Margaret and Mem. The racist-sexist society leaves them in a vulnerable position. Grange deserts Margaret and migrates to New York with a false hope of freedom in the North. Being driven by pain, Margaret decides on her own to commit suicide, leaving the fifteen-year-old Brownfield alone. Brownfield, Mem's husband, kills Mem. Margaret and Mem had tried to live their lives openly; but, at last they failed to do so. Walker suggests that it is very difficult to live and remain a womanist in a racist-sexist society. Ruth copes with her childhood trauma by using resistance. She tries to get rid of her father's iron-fists as well as to rise out of poverty. She fights to obtain an education and gain knowledge to upgrade her life. She deliberately dismantles gender specificity by breaking the obstacles imposed on her.

Ruth's case is different from that of Margaret, yet they share some commonalities as womanists. Margaret tries to survive before she decides to commit

suicide. As a womanist, she loves the members of her family. She loves her husband unconditionally and expects a reciprocal relationship with him. Against all expectations, she is treated as a slave throughout her life. Her husband engages in an extra-marital affair. Margaret is expected not to challenge her husband, but is goaded on to take revenge against his imperious behaviour. As we can see in the novel,

> Her bewilderment had changed to a feeling of inadequacy and she had tried to play her husband's game. She threw away on other man what she felt her husband did not want. And she had finally bedded down with Shipley, the man who had caused everything. (Walker, 2005, p. 228)

Margaret deliberately uses role-reversal and also engages in an extra-marital affair with a white man. Her husband thinks that he is allowed to engage in a relationship with other women; whereas the same thing is prohibited for his wife. At this point, Margaret takes her revenge in her own way. She breaks the existing socio-cultural norms by going into a relationship that results in the birth of a child of mixed colour. In this context, her pregnancy as well as motherhood is not a sign of her weakness. It is her conscious refusal to accept socially-prescribed gender specificities. Besides, such a bold act not only dismantles gender roles, but the act intentionally breaks racial barriers as well. Despite her husband's strong disapproval of white people, she shares a romantic relation with a white man. She ceases to be afraid of her extra-marital relation with him and of having a child. She transgresses gender and racial boundaries, and thus, establishes women's space outside societal norms. Margaret serves as a mother tree in the novel. She transfers her womanist ideologies to the next generation, Mem and Ruth.

Margaret does not tolerate her husband's injustice and breaks out of the internalization of gender performativeness. She thinks that desire can never be gender bound. As Butler (2004) argues, "Although being a certain gender does not imply that one will desire a certain way" (p. 1). Margaret, thus, is engaged in undoing gender performativity. Bates (2005) maintains, "Emotionally scarred from the physical abuse she has suffered at Grange's hand, Margaret exploits her own sexuality in retaliation for the treatment she receives from her husband" (p. 65). Margaret's action reveals that she is no longer afraid of her husband. She has enough courage to claim her body and assert her sexual preference. When Grange fails to control his wife's life, he leaves her. She commits suicide to show her revolt against her husband. She does not beg her husband to stay with her. Her husband wanted to kill her several times in the past. To her, none has the right to deprive her of basic human right to live on earth. Margaret figured out a way to take her own life before anyone took her life from her. She chose how and when to exit the world.

Notably, Willis (2006) argues that Margaret's behaviour seems to be outrageous, audacious, and courageous because she does what a man does and survives the most hostile situation. Margaret's revolt is not only against her husband but also against society, which accepts and forgives men's faults and their transgressions, but women have to suffer greatly and are punished violently for these same transgressions at the hands of men. Margaret works out her own way of life within these limitations. As Walker (2005) narrates, "One day she was, as he had always known her, kind, submissive, smelling faintly of milk; and the next day she was a wild woman looking for

frivolous things, her heart's good times, in the transient embraces of strangers" (p. 24). Margaret struggles to have control over her own body. She boldly enjoys her bodily performativeness and all aspects of her life, fearlessly ending it herself. The arbitrary cultural meanings which are inscribed on her body are warped so as to attribute a new meaning to her life and death. Thus, she upholds womanism.

Margaret's daughter-in-law is another example of Walker's womanist vision. Mem is depicted as a strong womanist character who wants to live her life to the full. Living is the greatest challenge which Mem accepts with courage. She also successfully challenges injustices and wins. Mem faces excessive pain; nonetheless, she faces it with patience and courage just like her mother-in-law. Mem's husband becomes jealous of her education. He hates her and even derogates her just like the way his own father, Grange, used to mistreat Brownfield's mother. "It was his great ignorance that sent her into white homes as a domestic, his need to bring her down to his level" (Walker, 2005, p. 63). When Mem gives birth to a slightly fair-skinned baby, Brownfield mistreats her. He knows that the baby is his biological son as the baby just looks like him. Brownfield suffers from inferiority complex and some psychological complexities. He just wants to torture Mem and kills the baby by leaving him in the cold. The act is instrumental in that he executed the brutal act just to terrorize his wife. He tortures her in different ways because he knows that she is better than him in every aspect. He refuses to accept the superiority of a woman over a man. Brownfield continues the legacy of slavery (master-slave relationship between husband-wife). Since he and his father are enslaved in the sharecropping system under Jim Crow laws (de facto slavery) in the post-Civil War South, the father and the son vent out their aggressions on their respective wives and children. An institutionalized racism in guise of sharecropping system gives rise to father and son's displaced aggression, and thus it causes a cyclic oppression. Being victimized, Brownfield victimizes Mem. However, Mem possesses the self-healing ability to soothe her seething soul and to find ways to get a better life. Her behaviour confirms womanist characteristics, such as "outrageous, audacious and courageous" (Walker, 1984, p. xi).

Mem goes beyond gender boundaries and asserts herself by renting a house by herself. She signs the lease paper without taking Brownfield's permission. She desires to live her life in a better place. After days of tolerating her husband's ill-treatment, she makes her own decision. If she wants to move on from her current situation, she has to do it herself. Mem says,

> You do exactly what you want and go precisely where you please. But I and these children going to live in that house leased. We ain't living in anymore dog patches, we going to have toilets and baths and 'lectric lights like other people. (Walker, 2005, p. 115)

Mem was devoted to her husband and family throughout her life. Now, it is time to think about herself and of her children. She believes that her dreams and desires cannot be decided by socio-political normativity. This firm belief makes her break normative conceptions of a gendered life. She uses her own strategy to fulfill her dreams. When she threatens her husband, he decides to shift to the new home with Mem and the children. When he finds that his wife is now beyond his control, he constantly seeks a chance to teach her a lesson and to take revenge on her. When he gets the chance, he shoots her

with a gun, killing her. It lands him in prison where he confesses the motive (his yearning for manliness) of his killing of Mem to his prison inmate, The Hatchet Murderer. Through Mem's character, Walker has shown black women's prolonged struggle for establishing their autonomy even at the cost of their lives. Butler (2004) contends that gender is "a practice of improvisation within a scene of constraint" (p. 1). That Mem goes on undoing gender performativity in the midst of social restraints is worth noticing. Her act of undoing gender role is a site of power or a site of political struggle to get rid of politically imposed norms on a woman's life.

Margaret and Mem share a common characteristic, in that they raise their voices against an unjust normative system which victimizes women. As mothers and wives, they are abused by their partners. Christian (1980) argues that Margaret and Mem are examples of Walker's first group of black women, the most abused of the abused. It is important to note that these women are destroyed when they begin to gather strength or become rebels. Margaret and Mem could not fulfill their dreams in their own lives. Since Margaret, Mem, and Ruth are associated in an interlinked community, Ruth continues the incomplete journeys of her grandmother and her mother. Ruth accomplishes their unfinished tasks. Ruth is portrayed as the perfect womanist who brings wholeness which completes the womanist idea. She amplifies the qualities of a womanist. Ruth's grandfather teaches Ruth to see the world in her own way. Ruth succeeds in freeing herself from her childhood trauma. As a womanist, she has a broad mind. She does not just jump to conclusions, but judges every side of any issue. Grange had a grudge against white people. This is because he at the Central Park in New York attempts to help a pregnant white woman from drowning; however, she prefers dying than taking help from a black man. As he says, "Teach them [black people] to hate, if you want them to survive" (Walker, 2005, 153).

Here, though Grange is Ruth's grandfather as well as guardian, he cannot control her judgement. Ruth's heart is open to people of all races. She does not believe in racial prejudice and as a womanist, she remains a universalist. Unlike her grandfather, she remains hopeful about a vast positive change which will come into their life. Walker has represented her as the womanist who loves her life despite all its hardships and setbacks. She says, "Maybe it would be better if something happened to change everything; made everything equal; made us feel us at home" (Walker, 2005, p. 210). Later, Ruth realizes that there is an existing racial hierarchy. Once she finds a book in her classroom. The opening pages of the book contain images which are emblematic of arbitrary racial classification. Through images whites are being described as scientists; whereas blacks are savages. Jacqueline Paine, a white girl, writes notes under the pictures which are extremely racist. At this, Ruth vehemently reacts against the existing racial differences. For her, equality of race and sex could constitute an ideal society. Grange wants to give Ruth a congenial environment at any cost, and thus, he becomes both a partner and a protector of his granddaughter.

Since Brownfield, unlike Grange, fails to change his life, he is sacrificed at the end of the novel (Karjalainen, 2012). Walker allows Grange to kill his son as a way of rewarding Grange's change from an abusive father to a loving and protective grandfather. Here, it is noticeable that his behaviour towards his wife was unjust. In the case of his

granddaughter, his attitude is totally changed. He changes himself because Ruth influences him. Besides, his own realization makes him change his conduct in his third life. Walker's womanist possesses the power to spread her love to everyone and everything that comes within the ambit of love. Grange gives Ruth financial and moral supports which make her succeed in achieving self-realization and in establishing her own identity. Ruth confirms the things which her mother and grandmother failed to acquire during their lifetime: "What scared her was that she felt her woman's body made her defenseless. She felt it could now be had and made to conceive something she didn't want against her will, and her mind could do nothing to stop it" (Walker, 2005, p. 193). Later, Ruth overcomes this fear and emerges as a courageous and a willful girl. From childhood to her present age, she invariably behaves in a womanist way. She is the youngest womanist of the novel. Her grandfather plays a significant role in her womanist growth and overall personal development. He says, "I never in life seen such a womanish gal" (Walker, 2005, p. 230). Ruth is the only Copeland who survives as a whole person, with the support of her grandfather. The grandfather's support and mothering bear witness to his womanist frame of mind.

Walker's womanism

Walker's women and womanist characters (here Margaret and Mem) experience oppression from their male counterparts, but they do not believe in separation. They try to struggle against difficulties by taking men as partners. It makes womanists different from feminists. Womanists do not want to escape from their male partners; they want to heal the female wounds that society inflicts on them by keeping a balance which helps them restore their identities. Walker (1984) says, "I am preoccupied with the spiritual survival, the survival whole of my people. But beyond that, I am committed to exploring the oppressions, the insanities, the loyalties, and the triumphs of black women" (p. 250). *Third Life* relates to black women's lives since they open themselves for self-realization and independence. Their quest for wholeness is fulfilled when they are capable of uniting despite differences. Coordination between men and women and their full participation in the society have the potential to make an ideal society.

Walker's womanism constitutes an interweaving of past and present, individual and community, and personal and political changes towards an aesthetic paradigm of wholeness. Apart from *Third Life*, Walker's women characters, such as Celie, Shug, Nettie, Sofia, and Mary Agnes, in *The Color Purple* (1985), Celie-Shug's (a lesbian couple) reappearance as grandmothers of Fanny in *The Temple of My Familiar* (1989), and Meridian Hill in *Meridian* (1976) are governed by womanist beliefs. Celie-Shug duo effectively promotes womanism. The idea is that they serve as mother trees; as such, they are closely attached to their children. They provide an adequate psychological support to their successors for the sustenance of womanist growth and development, thereby ensuring mutual survival and wholeness.

Margaret inspires her next generation through womanist resistance. In so doing, she had to face several traumatic incidents. Though she is mistreated by her husband, she loves her family and struggles to attain wholeness. Undoubtedly, it is Margaret who shows womanist ways of life to her successors and leaves her unfinished task to them. Ensslen (1982) talks about her unfinished task of womanism as follows:

> Margaret has unconsciously attempted at feminine self-realization but it is unsuccessful in her life. She has not achieved a level of independence from Grange that will enable her to feel that she can survive without him. Margaret's spontaneous reaction to her husband's desertion is to drive her radically into the moral resignation of suicide. Her self-realization or self-actualization will come to fruition only in her granddaughter Ruth's life but not in hers. (pp. 199-200)

Like Margaret, Mem loves her husband and children and bears all the torture because of them. Mem tries to bring wholeness by not separating from her husband. She chooses the teaching profession to support her family and tries to make her husband literate. Mem tries to teach Brownfield how to talk properly. Brownfield refuses to take lessons from his wife. He thinks that it does not suit him. He says, "I can't stand for women to go away for two weeks and come back talking proper" (Walker, 2005, p. 58). Since she is an educated woman, she wants him as her eligible partner. From the beginning of their marriage, Mem struggles for the welfare of the family. Before falling into poor economic condition, Mem used to save "every cent she was allowed to keep from her wages as a domestic because she wanted, someday, to buy a house" (Walker, 2005, p. 76). Though Mem's husband accepts the life of a poor black sharecropper, she aspires to live in a better place. She wants to buy a house. This is because she thinks that her family deserves a better accommodation.

Men's place in womanism

In womanism, men and women are partners in their struggle for equality and justice. In the novel, Grange wants to survive for Ruth. He says, "And still, in all her living there must be joy, laughter, contentment in being a woman; someday there must be happiness in enjoying a man, and children. Each day must be spent, in a sense, apart from any other" (Walker, 2005, p. 272). This reveals the womanist attitude of Grange. Ruth's life is linked with his as he takes the responsibility of directing her to the right path. Though Grange left his wife and son in Georgia and went to the North, after a while, he returned to the South to accompany Ruth. Grange settles down to a quiet and rural Georgia farm with Ruth, forbids her to work in the cotton fields and helps her to attend school. He broadens her idea about the world by describing his experiences and shares his knowledge of black folklore. He sings blues music and even dances with her to make her familiar with the tradition of the black folk art of the South. He even starts saving money which can be used for her college expenses. When Ruth gets her first menstrual period, the grandfather buys her napkins and other accessories so that Ruth be comfortable while menstruating. He is also concerned about the personal safety of Ruth and this is why he gives her a gun and teaches her to shoot. The grandfather's empathetic, nurturing, comforting, and overall motherly traits, as in the aforementioned lines, underscore his undoing of gender-specific performativities. He knows that he cannot keep her safe when he is not around. This is a compensatory act for Grange who realizes that Brownfield learnt the mistreating of women from Grange. If Grange had treated his son with love, the result of Brownfield's conjugal life would be different in all probability. As such, the father plays a part in the misdeeds of his son. Grange abandoned Brownfield when the latter needed the former the most. Grange could have saved the life of Mem, if he had raised his son with love and a sense of responsibility. His irresponsibility indirectly costs

Mem's life and directly costs Margaret's life as Grange confesses it to Brownfield after Grange returns to the South. It is his guilt that makes him take on the responsibility of Ruth's upbringing.

Hogue (1985) argues that this novel is centered on his coming back to the South, relinquishing his past. He also analyzes the set of relations to which he and his son have become victims. He tries to form a new set of relations so that Ruth can have more options and opportunities. Grange's nurturing provides her with emotional and spiritual support. She needs it to build the totality of her selfhood. He believes that Ruth must survive with wholeness. Walker (2005) says, "Survival was not everything. He had survived. But to survive whole was that he wanted for Ruth" (p. 272). Grange marries Josie and buys a farm to give a proper environment which would be favorable to Ruth's physical and psychological development. The environment and the influence of her role models along with Ruth's grandfather make her assert herself. Thus, she rejects her father's official claims which are made after he is released from prison for killing Mem. Her father, however, gains the legal custody over her. Grange knows that Brownfield's motive is to destroy the developing self of Ruth and that Brownfield might kill her.

Ruth passionately sticks to her womanist foremothers and strives to attain wholeness. At this stage of life, Grange could not afford to lose Ruth whose role models were the women whom he directly/indirectly mistreated. Grange kills his own son to secure the life of Ruth. It marks the third life of Grange who realizes his vices committed in the first and second stages of his life. The novel focuses on Grange's third life which is important in a sense that he (in his third life) moulds Ruth's and his own personality according to the womanist philosophy of life. This is how he admits his oppressive behaviour towards his wife and shows a gesture of respect to Ruth's foremothers. By shaping Ruth's life and his own, he shows his polite recognition for the womanists like Margaret and Mem. He finds the light of hope through Ruth and makes her aware of the struggle against the oppressions. It makes Ruth show interest in the ongoing Civil Rights Movement. As the novel ends, Grange is killed for the murder of Brownfield. At this time, Ruth's relatives are no more. However, with the influence of the trio, such as mother, grandmother, and grandfather, Ruth establishes her space while learning to raise her voice. This is what makes her survive with wholeness.

Conclusion

This paper locates formation and development of womanist ideologies/identities of the major women characters as well as their resistance to get rid of an imposed system of women's oppression and to sustain their freedom on all levels. The women characters, such as Margaret, Mem, and Ruth in *Third Life*, conceive of womanist ideologies which serve as their defensive strategies and healing forces in the face of gender-based violence in domestic spheres. They cease to uphold feminine specificities and regulative sexual norms of the racist-sexist society. They defy the socio-political matrix of women's oppression; they advocate personal sexual preferences and women's solidarity. As such, they attribute womanist genealogies of meaning to their developing selves as they journey towards wholeness.

The study shows that Ruth is the perfect example of championing womanism. In connection with Walker's interlinking of past and present or Granges three stages of life, Ruth's role is important. She considers her mother, grandmother, and the grandfather (in his third life) as her role-models. She sticks to her past, weaves her future; and thus, accomplishes her foremothers' unfinished womanist duties and responsibilities. Ruth is capable of taking a man (like her grandfather) as her partner and creating a vision of wholeness in which men and women are not rivals. Past struggles of Ruth's mother and grandmother and their sacrifices yield good results. Grange realizes his previous tyranny with his wife and makes his granddaughter follow her foremothers. Ruth follows their foot prints and creates women's space/possibilities.

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