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An analysis of how black women fought for the fundamental rights in Alice Walker's 'Meridian'

K. Srividya Lakshmi

Department of English, SRM Institute of Science and Technology, Ramapuram campus
vidya.karnan05@gmail.com

Abstract

The novel 'Meridian' written by Alice Walker, preceding *The Color Purple* is a heartfelt and moving story about one woman's personal revolution deals with the Civil Rights Movement and the novel is set at the back drop of 1960's Civil Rights Movement, people participate in it, sexist, racist attitudes towards women, motherhood, the failure of parental socialization, ignorance of blacks and their spiritual belief. In the American South in the 1960s it tracks Meridian Hill, a courageous young woman who dedicates herself heart and soul to her civil rights work, touching the lives of those around her even as her own health begins to depreciate. Hers is a lonely battle, but it is one she will not abandon, whatever the costs. There are many different types of authors in the world of literature, but Alice Walker who writes, through various personal experiences. Although most critics have labeled her writings as feminist and sexist, Walker describes herself as a "womanist", she defines this as "a woman who loves other women. Appreciates and prefers woman culture, woman's emotional flexibility and woman's strength. "Walker's thoughts and feelings show through in her writing of poetry and novels Alice Walker writes about the black woman's struggle for spiritual wholeness and sexual, political and racial equality"(Byerman).

1. Introduction

Meridian describes the peak of the Civil Rights Movement and it is a semi-autobiographical story of how a young black woman in the South responded to the rise of the civil rights movement. The woman faces the harsh reality of reinforcing the cycle of violence within the social structure in which she finds herself by responding to gender and class inequalities with violence. The title character Meridian is a college educated woman who commits her life to help southern black's political and social equality, she joins an organization of black militants but is forced to leave it when he refused to condone its violent actions. Alice walker continues her activist work, however and later becomes a legendary figure throughout the South. *Meridian* shows how people particularly black women are alienated from the society due to psychological violence.

The prevalent women characters in the novel *Meridian* are: Meridian, Anne Marion, Lynne – White Jewish girl who marries black Truman Held and tries to help blacks in the movement, mummified Marilene and Mrs. Hill. The subplot involves Meridian, her lover and compatriot Truman, and Lynne within the movement and hypocrisy among some black nationalists are also shown in *Meridian*. The first half of the novel tells the story of Meridian's life in a non-chronological order, cutting from the past to the future and back again. Readers learn that Meridian grew up on a farm with an Indian burial mound, the Sacred Serpent, in the backyard. Her mother was strictly and devoutly religious, and she never forgave Meridian for refusing to accept the church. Meridian was never warned about the ways that girls can get pregnant, so she is surprised to find out that her high school boyfriend, Eddie, has impregnated her. She drops out of high school, gets married, and gives birth to a boy, Eddie Jr. Meridian is not happy as a wife and mother. She doesn't enjoy sex and her husband begins to cheat on her, eventually abandoning her completely. Stuck at home all day with the baby, Meridian begins to fantasize about killing the child or herself. One day, she sees a group of black men on television hosting a voter registration drive. Later in the night, the house where the drive was held is bombed, killing children who lived on the street. Meridian is intrigued by the voter registration drive and begins to get involved with the town's nascent civil rights movement while a brother-in-law watches her child. She meets Truman Held and almost instantly feels attracted to him. Walker wants girls to be aware of sexual abuse, which they will face during adulthood. A mother's duty to her children is well shown in *Meridian*. *Meridian* conveys the message that social workers or activists at the end do not have anything for themselves and give away everything to people. Harries opines that "*Meridian* brilliantly illustrates [rights]... developed by the Civil Rights Movement" (98). Racism is well shown in the novel. Violence is a foremost theme throughout the book, both on the domestic and national scale. The civil rights movement that serves as the backdrop of the book was characterized by constant, cruel violence against not only activists but also innocent black men and women, even children and the elderly.

Meridian's spiritual progress is revealed with the help of her friendship with Anne Marion and her tendency to help poor black children, there is another threat also involved in this process. One positive subject running throughout the novel is friendship. Truman's lasting friendship permits them to support each other and even for Meridian to forgive Truman for his treatment of her in college. Although Anne-Marion and Meridian don't speak after college, the letters that they continue to send each other are evidence to the enduring bond that exists between them, a connection that even illness and drastic change

in circumstances can't fully break. Meridian and Lynne are able to sustain a friendship that cares Lynne during her darkest times, after Camara's death. These positive relationships enable characters faced with hate and evil to maintain their strength and stability. *Meridian* ends showing Truman with Meridian's conductor cap on Meridian, as her name "signifies the reconstructing of a self both personal and political" (*Modern Fiction Studies*, p.65) says Alan Nadel, is ever growing in confidence and stature. Religion and spirituality are major themes in the novel. Meridian's mother is deeply religious, but rigidly so: she turns away from her own daughter when Meridian refuses to encircle the church. In difference, Meridian and her father experience spiritual transformations outside of traditional religion when they stand on the Sacred Serpent burial mound. Meridian notes the way that traditional religious spaces are altered and modified by the black community to become strongholds of activism. One of the important figures in her life in college, Miss Winter is an organist who plays music in church, deeply moving Meridian and allowing her to feel a spiritual connection. Education is a major theme in *Meridian*; both predictable and non-conventional ideas of education and learning are explored throughout the book. Meridian views schoolroom education as one path to learning, which she expresses as people asking each other meaningful questions; she looks at higher education such as college as an opportunity to improve herself. However, she takes issue with the standpoint that many people, including her former husband, Eddie, have towards education: the focus is on getting through school and receiving a diploma, not on true learning. Meridian to begin a revolution is education and learning and it is central to her activism. Meridian as she grows asks many questions to the reader in its very form. (*Liberating Literature*, p.133) says Maria Lauret. Truman Held, the prominent male character in the novel, paints black women as "a repository of super human strength" (*Madhu Dubay*, p.127). Meridian creates an image of her own and this is materialized only after lots of painful experiences and Alice Walker well discussed and showed her real mind from the Character Meridian how she moves from a small town girl to a legendary political activist. Blacks become, "in the view of whites, a race prone to violence, illegitimacy venereal disease and broken homes, a people who threaten properly values, make low scores on intelligence tests, and lower standards in public schools" (Racism 722). Racism may be viewed as "any attitude, action or institutional structural which sub-ordinates a person or group because of his or their color" (Racism 720). Meridian poses questions that require a revolutionary mind to answer in her growth as a self-made woman. *Alice Walker's unsparing vision of black women's victimization in sexual love-their isolation, degradation, or grotesque defeat by despairing or aspiring black-men has been a major element in her growing body of work*" (*Martha J. Mc. Gown, Critique*, p-25.) Education plays an important role in the empowerment of human race in general. During the days of slavery, black women could not even dream of receiving any form of education. Men believed that educated women would overtake them in all fields. So they did not educate them. Only an educated woman can improve the status of family. She can understand herself and the world around her. Alice Walker tries to empower their gender by writing. Thus, the paper has analyzed how blacks fought for their fundamental rights in the Civil Rights Movement and how black women sacrificed themselves without considering the results.

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