

## STRIVING FOR DEMOCRACY: A STUDY OF ALICE WALKER'S *MERIDIAN*

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### RESISTING RACIAL BARBARISM

Walker's fiction strongly affirms that true revolution enlightens the inner self and it is through respect for life and generous way of living that freedom is attained. An individual has to confront egocentric self concerns to establish democratic pattern in society. Her novel *Meridian* gravely ponders over a series of barbaric acts and violent lynching of blacks. The painful picture of social and cultural degeneration and hypocrisy is indeed stirring and thought provoking. Mutual hatred often darkens social scenario resulting in hair raising incidents of bloodshed, rape, robbery, and merciless killing. Celie's father in *The Color Purple* is brutally killed simply because the white master's soul could not compromise with his hardworking spirit and prosperity. A confrontation between individual and society with a vigorous demand for justice and integrity has been well crystallized by Walker's pen. Most of Walker's protagonists are equipped with intelligence, acute sensitivity and cosmic vision of life. With an unyielding courage and confidence, Walker calls to counter the ruthless forces which deem to pressurize and lower down common men's lot. Walker's strong conviction is that "man only truly lives by knowing." Walker rejects cowardly submission of a man "who simply performs, coping the daily habits of others, but conceiving nothing of his creative possibilities as a man and accepting someone else's superiority and his own misery"(Gardens 121-122). Walker's commitment to support the principle of democratic set up is highlighted through her protagonist Meridian who is dedicated to the values of humanity, equality and dignity. Walker is firmly resolved to discard all those circumscriptive and stiling precepts which may impede the growth of one's autonomy and identity. Walker rejects the conventional religion that encourages passive acceptance of the overlapping constraints with an escapist and conformist coincidence. Meridian, the protagonist in the novel, challenges the rationality of her mother's Christian belief of relinquishing all her responsibilities to God. Meridian defies by keeping silence and refuses to submit to the strangulating hold of traditional adherence to hypocrisy and self-deceptive codes that may only add to one's surrender and failure. Silence is a legitimate mode of protest and it empowers Meridian to defiantly challenge the system that denies her individuality. Her self determination, elevation and transformation, strongly stir the human beings around her.

Walker's *Meridian* is an eye opening artistic venture that brought laurels to the author with world wide commendation and unrivalled popularity. Meridian's struggle represents the black people's awareness towards their right of equality and independence. Even after the proclamation of emancipation, the southern states suffered from the legacy of slavery. Equal opportunities were granted to the blacks but the practice of segregation continued and got sanctioned even by the Supreme Court of America. Educational institutions and medical facilities in hospitals were separately established for the blacks. The

equality rights looked pretentious and impractical without political governance. Discrimination and segregation prevailed as earlier. The black heroes like Martin Luther and John F Kennedy emphasized that black men's practical participation in building the social and political structure may only empower their dignity. They motivated their community to rise and resist the oppressing forces. Racial confrontation is focused when *Meridian* carries the corpse of a drowned black child to the Mayor's office to protest against negligence of drainage ditches in black neighborhood. Racial hatred and victimization has also been presented through a trivial carnival exhibit show which requires separate days for black and white attendants. The real life of guano plant workers, who are sectioned off from the rest of the town, is reflected in the most convincing colour. Walker highlights the names of famous political and spiritual leaders who were assassinated for taking part in Civil Rights Movement. Walker also adds the names of less known revolutionaries like Viola Liuzzo and Cynthia Wesley who were killed in the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing. The novel is replete with first hand view of the turbulent sixties in America and never refrains from assailing even the darkest aspects of the revolution. It also portrays how the movement failed to maintain the ideals which it cherished, and unfortunately succumbed to the evil which it aimed to alleviate. The Movement "reflected the oppressiveness of patriarchal capitalism. Activists merely turned political rhetoric to their own ends while containing to repress spontaneous individuality. To overcome this destructiveness, Walker reaches for a new definition of revolution. Her hope for a just society imbibes not merely in political change, but in personal transformation" (Karen 130). Her journey towards political movement of 1960 is primarily motivated by her impulsive resistance.

Striving for democratic values, Walker vehemently denounces the social sores that she had to fight herself as an activist. *Meridian* exhibits the strength of Alice Walker who brilliantly expressed her concern for the black women. *Meridian's* courage and strenuous stance exemplify the perseverance and fearlessness of the novelist herself. The similarities between the real creator and the fictional protagonist are evidently noticeable. *Meridian's* growing up during the Civil Rights Movement and her campaign to register African American voters, remind of Walker's struggle for equality and justice for the black people. Walker's treatment of realism in *Meridian* consciously rejects the idea of sacrificing life for the cause of justice and freedom. *Meridian's* political commitment is not to be ended in physical martyrdom as life is extremely precious. Inner elevation transcends all outward boundaries and *Meridian* displays an exemplary transformation. She has already suffered physical hardships by going partially blind and having fits and paralytic stroke. Dedicated to the service of her people, *Meridian* must prevent more martyrdom and bloodshed, and must resolve to live without violence. By the end of the novel *Meridian's* elevated alignment is absorbed into collective identity of a collective group. "*Meridian* is born anew... without ordinary pre requisites for personal identity" (Davis 49). *Meridian's* cultural heritage will strengthen her to speak out against racist and patriarchal hegemony, and refusing to stand alone and silent in the margin, *Meridian* would come forward and sing with congregation "when they stop to wash off the blood and find their throats too choked with the smell of murdered flesh to sing, I will come forward and sing from memory songs they will need once more to hear"(221). Reflecting the real picture of a gruesome war for independence, *Meridian* emerges as a forceful figure to thwart aside injustice, inequality and degradation.

Walker as an activist also presents a psycho analysis of the racial masters whose colonial aspirations ravaged and ruined human civilization. Walker's fiction renders a shocking view of the psychology of white people who harbour a secret fear of the blacks acquiring power and position in American society. To curb their spirit of dignity and venture, the whites indulge in barbaric modes of violence, and by beating, looting and lynching they repress the blacks and coerce them into submission.

Walker's fiction lays bare the hypocrisy of racial authority that seems deaf to human cry for justice. However, Walker's presentation of socio political scenario is extremely pungent as she not only depicts surface level relentlessness but also probes into the subtle motives of hatred and hostility, and also warns of the horrid consequences of violence. Violent modes are adopted by both the oppressor and oppressed, the blacks and whites, as they apprehend offensive onslaughts from each other resulting in fatal conflicts and loss of harmony. Violence stems from innate urgency to thwart back social disparity and economic disorder. The oppressed section while releasing the venom of frustration grows aggressive, and vengeance is sought directly against the destructive forces. A number of incidents relating colour based racial rivalry and

confrontation have been critically presented. Meridian is shocked to see through TV that "an entire cluster of houses on that street" (72), had been blown up. The opponents of Civil Rights Movement indiscriminately attacked the blacks with guns and a number of them were injured and killed. The most harrowing experience that shocked Meridian was that the house she visited previous day was also put on flames. With an unbending will, Meridian braves to encounter all threats to her life. Most of the activists are mercilessly beaten and their faces are misshapen with swellings. But Meridian and her supporters are determined not to yield. Meridian, dragged by her hair was "grubbed", "punched" and "kicked" (84), but no torture could scare her, and she firmly handled the adverse situation.

Walker mentors her community to overthrow the barriers in their way to advancement and prosperity. She is incisively critical of patriarchal authority which views woman as an object of sexuality. Traditional parameters of evaluating woman as a devoted wife and sacrificing mother, are obsolete and unacceptable. Walker as womanist critically bashes all those ties which degrade and destroy the inner self of a woman. Despite her mother's protest, Meridian gives up her child for adoption and joins college with a scholarship. Meridian fails to meet the standards of her mother's religion which expect women to be obedient and meek. Self sacrifice and martyrdom of unwed mothers painfully results in self abnegation which Meridian resolved to fight back. Walker's perspective on traditional and feministic motherhood is not restricted to blind allegiance to authority. Patriarchal standards kill a woman who dares to ignore its commands. However, Meridian escapes this symbolic death by her activist participation and adventurous spirit to resist deteriorating traditions. Meridian is not prettified into a perfect mother but through her activist role even goes a step further. The dividing line in between the role of mythical black motherhood and the unconventional rebellious activist mother, opens an unbridgeable wedge that mothers like Meridian have to defiantly experience.

*Meridian*, a fine and artistically tout novel, accomplishes to target the massive issues of urgent concern. Like a true crusader for human values, Walker reflects her courageous conviction in the process of evolution and upliftment. The world of her fiction realistically represents the complexities of practical life. The most sensational and challengeable issues have been focused with an amazing and conceivable grip. Walker vehemently attacks the authority which is callous and insensitive to the agonies of its people. Violence is inherently weaved in the system, and the black women have to encounter with self defensive strategies. With an unquestioned resilience, she remains unvanquished and succeeds to seek empowerment and dignity. She rebels against patriarchal constraints that deny and obstruct her free blooming. Meridian abandons her child and suffers endless emotional guilt. The wild child roaming here and there and pregnant with heavy belly in the novel is discarded by society. The unwanted motherhood that is imposed on her by hooligans, ruins her life. All doors are closed for her and she meets a tragic end while hit and killed by a speeding truck. The unfortunate state of such unwed mothers who are deserted, dejected and die in isolation lacking community support, is indeed alarming. Fast Marry, another victim, in the novel is

compelled to commit suicide because of forced pregnancy. As Susan Willis writes, "Fast Mary's inability to call on her sister's students and her final definitive isolation at the hands of her parent raise questions Meridian will also confront: Is there a community of support?"(113) But Meridian, the rebellious activist, is exhausted of restricting pressures of her heritage and she is to meet her own standards of benevolence and generosity. The motherly love pulsating in her heart is all embracing and eternal. Meridian's love for wild child evidently enlightens the reader with Meridian's tender and caring motherhood. Walker desperately tries to draw attention towards the poor lot of unwed mothers and pleads to secure a place of refuge for them. She seems sharply critical of the admonishing attitude and apathy of the world around such helpless women who have been doomed to meet humiliation and painful end. Meridian's compassionate handling, sympathy and motherly care in fact, reveal Walker's concern for suffering humanity. Her love is transcended to cosmopolitan considerations and warmth. Meridian, a non conformist and intellectually awakened, resolves to defiantly fight back hypocrisy and conventional constraints.

Walker's optimistic stand and firm faith in a new dimension of freedom and healthy social order, is explicitly delineated through Meridian's constant march towards establishing a selfless, just and democratic set up. Through Meridian's self restrain and rock like firmness to face disgusting situations, Walker seems celebrating inner awakening of Meridian. Meridian is graced with austerity, enlightenment and the recalcitrant spirit that speeds up movement for equality by non-violent means. Her sole concern seems to be humanistic perception and her activities reveal a pattern of acquiring self reliance through service of humanity. She stands a pillar of strength and supports even Truman who deserted her and married Lynne, a white worker in the movement. Meridian pursues her commitment with courage, confidence and honesty, and surprisingly it is Truman at the end of novel who utterly longs for Meridian and calls "help me through this shit" (188). Meridian, who had earnestly depended on Truman's love, solace and support, was grievously deceived and deeply hurt by Truman and Lynne's relationship. But during their most painful moments of the death of their daughter Camara, Meridian emerges an angel of forgiveness and love, and gives them moral and emotional support. "It was Meridian they both needed, and it was Meridian who was, miraculously there"(188). By drawing upon her inner resource of human love and forbearance, Meridian stands by them as stress bursting beneficiary. This courageous, selfless dedication is what distinguishes Walker's protagonist. Meridian displays Walker's amazing resilience while facing pressure and opposition in real life situation. The black missionaries in the novel *Meridian* also exemplify Walker's trust in enduring cultural values of unity and harmony. She tries to identify blurring sores that hamper the progress of a community as a whole. Walker seems intent upon freeing oneself from blind devotion to religion and social taboos. Meridian passionately encounters all those restrictions which may hamper her flourishing independence and self-awareness. "It seemed to Meridian that her legacy from her mother's endurance, her unerring knowledge of rightness and her pursuit of it through all distractions, was one she would never be able to match. It now occurred to her that her mother's and her grandmother's extreme purity of life was compelled by necessity. They have not lived in an age of choice" (124). Meridian however, is not to submit to irrational standards.

## CONCLUSION

Walker's unshakable belief in the establishment of a colour free and well ordered domain is evidently dominant in almost all her novels. She dreams a world of cosmopolitan love where liberty and equality prevail everywhere. Her commitment to the cause of freedom is of cosmic view and there is no

place of hatred and revenge. She is as an activist dream of an ideal world where violence cannot be contemplated even against racial oppressors in absolute necessity of self defense. Walker is looking to construct a society where trust, tolerance, love and dignity for every member may be realized in the true spirit. She advocates the necessity to cherish higher goals of human love and sympathy so that a state of democracy, justice and oneness may usher.

### Works Cited:

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