
Subversion of Patriarchal Discourse in *Meridian*

Rajendra Prasad Chapagace, Ph.D.

Associate Professor of English, Saraswati Multiple Campus, Tribhuvan University

email : aahatchapa@gmail.com

Abstract

Walker in her novel Meridian, criticizes patriarchal society's expectations of woman's roles and advocates about women's individuality and independence. The novel examines its title character Meridian's emergence as a liberated strong woman. It observes Meridian's attempts to break the patriarchal tradition and how she brings an end to the racism and segregation. It also studies the lives and revolutionary activities of black women. Initially suspended black woman, Meridian, becomes a liberated woman as she knows what she should borrow from the past for the present to create a new future. . Though she grows up in the racist, sexist and patriarchal society, she rebels against oppressive systems to attain her self-identity and selfhood. She considers marriage a false institution and deserts it as a challenge to the patriarchal ideology. She challenges the patriarchal image of womanhood and motherhood and presents herself as a liberated woman rather than a submissive wife and loving mother. She starts her journey in search of meaningful personal and political life. She subverts all sorts of patriarchal discourses dominant in racist and sexist society. She finally paves a path of liberty with self identity and selfhood for herself and for the whole women. The paper tracks Meridian's experiences from her college life to her self-determining liberated woman of present. She is free to love men without the burdens of marriage, sexual restriction and motherhood. It also explores black women's hidden strength, their beauty and feelings of sisterhood and wifehood. The study reveals how Meridian, revolts against the patriarchal ideologies to regain her identity and wholeness.

Keywords: discrimination, liberation, rebellion, segregation, transformation

Introduction:

Meridian, a novel by Alice Walker, talks about the personal evolution of a young African American woman against the backdrop of socio- political situations and civil rights movement. The novel moves round its title character Meridian Hill, a young black woman and college student in the late 1960s, who embraces the civil rights movement at a time when the movement becomes violent. It also deals with the issues of sexual and racial politics of America of the time.

Meridian, a rebellious teenager girl falls in love with Eddie and gets pregnant while studying in high school. So, she is expelled from school for being pregnant. But a misunderstanding occurs between the couple and their marriage begins falling apart. However, she bears a baby but suffers from postpartum depression. She becomes uninterested in motherhood. She thinks of killing her baby or herself as she remains in a constant state of lethargy. She begins to be critical of everyone and everything around her. As she finds a house of civil rights workers bombed, she stands against the Whites' domination and joins civil right movement. When she is offered a scholarship to attend college, she gives up her son

to go to college in Atlanta. She meets a French-speaking activist Truman and falls in love with him but her relationship with Truman also becomes stressful because she comes to know that he is in dating with White exchange students. However, their love affair continues and they have a sex. Meridian becomes pregnant but Truman leaves her. So Meridian undergoes a painful abortion.

As an activist of civil right movement, Meridian is asked to support the violence caused by the civil rights movement but she does not support it. She hates killings and bloodshed. She moves to small towns and begins to live in poor black communities, fighting against racial injustice and registering black people to vote. She becomes sick as a manifestation of her conflicts about the injustice she sees in the world. Meridian travels to small, poor, black areas of the South and works for registering black voters. She also continues fighting against social and racial injustices suffering black people. Finally she heals herself working in the service for the black people. Truman comes to meet her in the south. Then both of them begin to work for the rights and justice for poor black people.

This study aims at exploring Meridian's attempt to subvert the patriarchal discourses with construction of female subjectivity. Meridian, the protagonist of the novel, is found in the process of growth and transformation from an ordinary Negro girl to self conscious and self illuminated woman of the black community. It also aims at defining the pains and struggle of black women to achieve liberation and establish their self dignity not as a woman but as a human being. It also deals with the how Meridian rebuffs patriarchal image of woman and motherhood and becomes independent, free and emergent woman. Meridian, initially a suspended black woman, emerges as a self-regulating, liberated and emergent woman.

Teenager's Rebellion: A Bold Step

Meridian's teenage begins from the background of male's physical and sensual assault on her. From the beginning of her teenage, Meridian has to fight against probable sexual violence from the boys of her contemporary age. The precarious social milieu forces her make relation with a strong male partner, Eddie to escape from sexual harassments: "it saved her from the strain of responding to other boys or even noting the whole category of Men"(Walker, Meridian, 1976, p. 61). She makes a rather close relationship with him which changes into sexual relation. Her frequent sex with him results in unexpected pregnancy that comes as a total shock to her. She marries Eddie but it is an accidental case for her because she has been ignorant about the result of sexual relation with male. Her guardians, especially her mother, have never told her anything about sexuality. Walker (1976) states as:

Her mother never even used the word, and her lack of information on the subject of sex was accompanied by a seeming lack of concern about her daughter's morals. Having told her absolutely nothing, she [her mother] had expected her to do nothing . . . her mother only cautioned her to "be sweet". She did not realize this was a euphemism for "Keep your panties up and your dress down", an expression she had heard and been puzzled by. (p. 60)

Meridian is ignorant about the result of sexual relation with man because no one has talked to her about it. Her mother has never used the word 'sex' but only asks her to 'be sweet' without specifying what she means.

Due to lack of information and knowledge about the result of having sex, Meridian carelessly keeps sexual relation with Eddie: "she had had sex as often as her lover wanted it, sometimes every single night" (p. 61). Neither she has been told nor did she know herself that sexual intercourse with male could result in pregnancy. As she marries Eddie, she has been "expelled from the school because of the pregnancy" (p. 62). On the other hand, she could not make emotional attachment with her husband. She wants to meet her husband at equal level rather than to feel burdened with her child and pregnancy. As a result, her marriage ends in divorce. Pregnant and married to a high school dropout, Meridian struggles with thoughts of suicide or killing her child, but eventually decides to give the child up and attend college. Second part deals with her love affairs with Truman and some rebellious actions like abortion of her second pregnancy and active participation in the black civil rights movement in search of meaningful personal and political life. As a teenager, Meridian is committed to get release from sexual bounds and her commitment for the "survival and wholeness of entire people" (Walker, In Search, 1984, p. xi). Her quest for black womanhood finally turns into a concern for the survival and wholeness of the black community.

Personal and Political Transformation

Critics read the novel with the background of political context of the time. Stein (1986) calls the novel "a fictionalized political essay with the result that the inwardness of the characters is sometimes sacrificed" (p.130). She designates the novel as political essay. However, she comes back to the humanistic based supposition of subjectivity. She says, in Meridian, "Walker argues that the movement failed to acknowledge women's selfhood and thus perpetuated the counter revolutionary values of a destructive society" (p. 129). According to Stein, Walker's new definition of true revolution as it applies to Meridian Hill is a search of selfhood. Before Meridian can successfully define her role in the revolution, she must first successfully define herself. Stein (1986) states:

In order to live, Meridian rejects the temptations of conventional middle-class life, the conventional women's roles of dutiful daughter, wife, mother, lover. But she must reject as well the contemporary temptation of martyrdom and false revolutionary consciousnesses, for these roles are death masks. (p.140)

Stein frames her argument in term of self actualization of black women. Meridian rejects traditional narrative of women's life and seeks a way for self actualization with revolutionary consciousness. In this context, Dubey (1994) also points out that Stein "correctly describes the novel's critique of the black nationalist movement but overlooks the novel's sharp distinction, based on feminist grounds, between the nationalist and the Civil rights Movement" (p. 186). Meridian's search for "the whole" is possible when she realizes communal love. She sees her self-identity in the wholeness of black community. She enters into the process of self consciousness and awareness.

Danielson (1989) places the novel, Meridian firmly in its political context. In her essay, "Alice Walker's Meridian, Feminism, and the Movement", Danielson foregrounds the civil rights movement as the content of the novel. She takes civil rights movement as "background and texture in the novel" (p. 317). The political content of the novel creates a narrative which allows Walker to utilize various

dominant discourses of the 1970s. Cardon (2011) in his essay "From Black Nationalism to the Ethnic Revival: Meridian's Lynne Rabinowitz", remarks:

Meridian's journey over the course of the novel is one from civil rights to Black Nationalism, from female subjugation to feminist consciousness, from racism to cross-cultural understanding, from alienation to acceptance within a community, and from physical and psychological sickness to redemption and recovery. (p. 160-61)

As a traveler, Meridian travels within her as a black girl, black woman and civil rights activist collecting multi colored experiences of life. She displays active involvement in Civil Rights Movement and is awakened about her true self and individuality at the same time. On the other hand, the novel, Meridian functions to identify and subvert the discourses which construct female subjectivity by creating an image of the African American women in the political background of the time. Winchell (1992) points out that "Meridian has received relatively little critical attention in spite of the fact that it offers a glimpse, rare in fiction, of the civil rights movement from the perspective of a young black woman" (p. 285). However, almost all the critical commentaries produced up to now about the novel generally focuses on the political context of Civil Rights Movement. It can be said that Meridian shows both personal and political transformation of its protagonist Meridian Hill.

Sexual Liberation- A Rebellion against Patriarchal Values:

Meridian fights against her racist and sexist society. She has to break most of the generally accepted patriarchal norms and values that govern her society. She grows up in the racist and sexist society and rebels against the oppressive system to attain her self-identity and selfhood. An early teenager of thirteen, Meridian does not accept Jesus into her life. This causes her mother to withdraw her love from her. She rejects patriarchal expectation about women and decides to lead her life with her own choice.

Meridian tries to lead a free life rejecting the patriarchal institution of marriage. She is not bound even for sexual relation with her husband while other women of her society are supposed to be sexual toys of their husbands as their duty is "to lay back and be pleased" (McDowell, 1993, p. 170). Meridian gets married with Eddie in her mid teenage and becomes mother of a baby boy. Walker (1976) remarks that Eddie has to make requests to her even for having sexual intercourse with her. He requests her as "And tonight, please, open your legs all the way" (p. 64). Unlike the traditional black women of her society, Meridian does not have much interest in sex as she just lies on bed and simply endures her sexual experiences. Making love to her is like a sexual assault on her. Eddie remarks, "I have to fight to get your legs open; you know that as well as I do. They're like somebody starved them shut . . . you just don't care about it anymore" (p. 64). He has to struggle to reach her. He has been taught by his patriarchal society that a woman's first duty as a wife is to provide good sex services to her husband. This image fits in the patriarchal image of a woman as devoted wife. Meridian rebels against this patriarchal image of woman by refusing to open her legs for her husband to have comfortable sex with her.

For Eddie, sex is very important whereas for Meridian it seems to be of no great concern. She seems to be less interested in sex for she has "never shown anything approaching interest" (p. 64) for it. Sex is not only means of satisfaction for her: "she would have been just as happy, happier, without it" (p. 65). But Eddie does not understand her feeling and sometimes would "seem hurt and complain" (p. 65). Consequently, Eddie runs after a woman who loves sex and is able to offer her body to him for sex as much as he wants every night. Meridian comes to know her husband's affair with another woman but she does not mind it. She neither hates nor loves sex but makes use of it in her own choice. Thus, Meridian defies the expectations of patriarchal society in relation to sex.

Rejection of Motherhood:

Meridian rejects her motherhood. She gives birth to a baby boy but does not enjoy her motherhood. She finds herself "in hard labor for a day and a half" (p. 69) to give birth to her baby. For her, motherhood is no better than "a ball and chain" (p. 69). She frequently wants to scratch him out of her life who looks like his father. She gives birth to a male baby, an agent of patriarchy for future and it also augments her unhappiness of being mother. She also thinks of murdering her baby boy. It is a weird and wonderful thought for patriarchal expectation of a mother. She is neither loving mother nor a loyal wife. It signifies her rebellion against the patriarchal image of womanhood and motherhood. She considers marriage a false institution and deserts it as a challenge to patriarchal ideology. It can be said that if she had given birth to a female baby, she would have been less unhappy than she is now.

Eddie's affair with another woman and his act of destroying his wife to live with the new woman accounts for man's exploitation of woman. The repercussion of such aspects can be seen at the psychological level. Meridian develops an aversion for her son. She begins to grow an eccentric thought in her that "she had urges to kill [her baby]. To strangle that soft, smooth, helpless neck, to push down that kinky head into a tub of water, to lock it in its room to starve" (p. 72-73). However, she suppresses the thought of murdering her own child and forces herself to think of "methods of killing herself" (p. 69) instead. A mother's thought of murdering her own child is far from patriarchal expectation of a mother. The patriarchal society expects motherhood to be sweet, pleasant and a matter of pride for proving her fertility. A mother is expected to be adoring of her child. But Meridian revolts against this patriarchal image of womanhood and motherhood. She actively resists the patriarchal repression.

Meridian keeps momentarily sexual relations with Truman and becomes pregnant. She aborts her fetus and ties her tubes. It is a sharp challenge to patriarchal expectation from women.

It is important to note that Meridian aborts the baby making her own decision not to tie up in marital bondage with Truman. In this regard, Abraham (1994) in her essay "The Dialectic of Feminism in Afro-American Novels" states, "Her abortion and sterilization symbolize her anger and frustration towards Truman, pregnancy and motherhood. It is also a metaphor for rooting out sexual weakness" (p. 24). She resists male repression aborting her baby. She refuses to be the victim of sexual exploitation. Instead, she roots out her sexual weakness and paves a way to new life.

Meridian wants to meet her husband at equal level. Unlike Sula, the protagonist of Toni Morrison's *Sula*, Meridian never declares, "I don't want to make somebody else (babies) but I want to make myself" (Morrison, 1974, p. 23). Instead, she experiences motherhood in the initial stage of her life and decides to get rid of her baby to find out her own identity and selfhood. This new way enables her to attain the highest point of power, prosperity, splendor, health, vigor, etc. McDowell (1990) in her essay, "The Self in Bloom: Alice Walker's Meridian", says, "Meridian develops a completeness of being" (p. 262). Meridian starts a journey from the most ordinary position as a high school dropout to a self-illuminated person and eventually attains selfhood. Washington (1993) in her essay, "An Essay on Alice Walker", describes Meridian as, "she is evolved from a woman reaped by racial and sexual oppression to a revolutionary figure effecting action and strategy to bring freedom to herself and other poor disenfranchised Blacks in the South" (p. 48). Meridian resists not only the bondage of marriage but also the whole cherished norms and values of patriarchal society in relation to sex and motherhood about women. She rebels against the traditional and synthetic images of women as she wants to be mother of greater community.

Resisting Institutionalized Sexual Exploitation:

Sexual abuse is a form of oppression institutionalized by males on females. Meridian suffers from this abuse time and again. At the age of fifteen, Meridian becomes the victim of seduction. George Dexter, a half-white man in his fifties and the owner of Dexter funeral home, manages to seduce her by giving her candy for a swift and exploratory feel: "He [Dexter] would take out his wallet crammed with money, and leave it in the sofa between them while he felt her breasts and tried to pull her onto his lap" (Walker, 1976, p. 66). But Meridian never enjoys such erotic activities by her heart nevertheless she seems to be offering her body to him. At this level, the candy and the wallet crammed with money transform her into a passive victim.

However, Meridian's passivity is replaced with an act of passive resistance when Dexter's assistant tries to arouse sexual feelings in her so as to have sex with her. He holds her back tight against her hip and whispers in her ear: "Think of how it would feel . . . Experience is the best, the only teacher . . . just looking at water will never teach you to swim" (Walker, 1976, p. 66). He organizes an episode of sex with another girl of about sixteen for Meridian to watch and get tempted for sex: "[He] arranged for her to watch him while he seduced another school girl" (p. 66). But Meridian hates it and never offers herself to him for sex though she gets fascinated to see his sexual intercourse with the girl. Meridian is really "suspicious of pleasure" (p. 67). She "approach [es], it might gaze on it with longing," (p. 67) but never gives up her self confidence and decision in relation to sex. She can embrace or hate sex on her own choice and decision. It shows that Meridian is the woman capable of making self decision and self action. She can resist any type of sexual repression of patriarchal society.

Walker (1976) states that Meridian reads some magazines and she finds them creating a negative image of women. The magazines assert, "Woman was a mindless body, a sex creature, something to hang false hair and nails on" (p. 71). It reflects sexist attitude and cultural devaluation- a form of oppression. The knowledge she has gained from the magazines helps her to make decision to break

up her marriage: "they [magazines] helped her to know for sure her marriage was breaking up" (p. 71). For Meridian, marriage is a false institution which steals a woman's independence and happiness. For her, sex is a lie and a deception which provides a false sense of joy. No sooner is one enjoying sex than she is trapped into the prison of wifehood and motherhood. Meridian decides to resist it by escaping from the entrapments of wifehood and motherhood. When her child has grown a bit, Meridian breaks up her marriage and takes the child to spend days with his baby uncle under the care of her mother in law. She deserts her husband and her child. She is still seventeen years old and a dropout from high school: "She was still only seventeen. A drop-out from high school, a deserted wife, a mother, a daughter-in-law" (p. 75-76). Unlike the elderly women of her society, she revolts against generally cherished patriarchal norms about a woman. Meridian, hence, starts resisting the patriarchal repressions.

Challenging Male Ideology:

Meridian challenges the patriarchal oppressive ideology in relation to women's life. As a big challenge to it, she deserts not only her house but also her husband and child. She rejects the patriarchal institutions that have held her down and entrapped her into the cage of subjugation and repression all the time. As a wife of patriarchal framework, a woman is subdued by her husband with his endless demands from being a sex tool to family servant. Not only that, he further demands her to be a machine of bearing children to being personal steward. As a mother, the woman is trapped by the menial duties of motherhood as whole timer care taker of her child. Reflecting upon her experience, Walker (1976) states that "motherhood is like being restricted in ball and chain" (p. 69). As a daughter in law, the woman has got to strive to win the acceptance of her in-laws and make every effort to justify herself as a good daughter in law of the patriarchal social expectation. Meridian realizes all these patriarchal subjugations and decides to invalidate the institutions of wifehood, motherhood and daughter-in-law. She applies the tool of active resistance to revolt against the premeditated repressions of patriarchal ideology and deserts all the patriarchal institutions of repression.

Meridian exercises freedom to make her own choices about her life style. She can decide to leave her husband and her child. Deserting her house, husband and baby, she joins college as a student and Civil Rights Movement as an activist. These are the choices that a woman with full freedom can make. The elderly women could not do what she has done. Elderly women had to lead the life of sacrifice to meet the demands of patriarchal domination: "Her mother's life was sacrifice She did not appear to understand much beyond what happened in her own family, in the neighborhood and in her church" (Walker, 1976, p. 77). Meridian's resistance against racial and social repression starts when "she leaves her husband and gives up her child, distances herself from her devout Christian mother and devotes her life to activism" (Lauret, 2000, p. 60). Unlike the elderly women, Meridian makes choices and decisions for her own and defies the patriarchal expectation of a good woman.

Untying the Cultural and Family Ties:

Meridian revolts against patriarchal and social norms and values made for woman as a mother. She gives up her child and as a mother of a baby, joins college to pursue higher education. Majority of

the women obeying the patriarchal norms feel Meridian's world view and action unique and shocking ones as the narrator remarks: "When she gave him away, she did so with a light heart. She did not look back, believing she had saved a small person's life" (Walker, 1976, p. 90-91). Meridian thinks that giving her son away is the best thing for both child and herself. Her mother advises her not to abandon her child but she turns her deaf ear to her. When she rejects her motherhood, she offends and loses the affection of her mother, her family and her community. She alienates herself from the rest of the society by disobeying the generally accepted norms and values of patriarchal society. It is her first but really bold step against patriarchal culture.

Meridian thinks that marriage and motherhood are the barriers to transform herself into wholeness of her selfhood and self identity. Being a mother of patriarchal society, a woman is not allowed to abandon her child but is expected to be a loving mother as her mother remarks, "it can't be moral, that I know. It can't be right to give away your child. . . . If the good Lord gives you a child, he means for you to take care of it" (Walker, 1976, p. 87). If a woman does not become responsible to take care of her child, she is labeled as notorious woman. But Meridian crosses the boundary of societal norms and unties the cultural and family ties. She does not care such norms designed to make a woman a perpetual victim of patriarchal repression. She wants to free herself from the cultural and family bondage to achieve the wholeness of her selfhood and to devote rest of her life in revolution to free her people. From her early teenage, Meridian looks like a woman with rebellious nature and actions. Her decision is on the contrary to the expectation and values of patriarchal ideology. Here she resists actively the cultural and family ties and comes in active resistance of patriarchal repressive ideology.

Conclusion:

The novel, *Meridian* functions to identify and subvert the patriarchal discourses which construct female subjectivity by creating an image of the African American woman. Meridian, the protagonist of the novel, is found in the process of growth and transformation from an ordinary Negro girl to self conscious and self illuminated woman of the black community. She has to face the challenges of racism and sexism but she relentlessly fights against them to attain an image of selfhood. Meridian thinks that marriage and motherhood are the barrier for her to transform herself. So she abandons her first child, aborts her second pregnancy and leaves her husband. She realizes that in order to retain her wholeness, she must rise above bodily claims. So she tries to uplifts herself from the emotional and biological demand of female body.

Meridian revolts against the patriarchal image of womanhood and motherhood. Her premarital sex with Eddie and love marriage with him in her mid teenage are big challenges to the social taboo about sex and patriarchal institution of marriage. She offers sex to anybody she likes and even does not care her husband's sexual relation with other women. It signifies a revolt against patriarchal concept of sexual relation that limits sex only between wife and husband. She abandons her child and also aborts her second pregnancy as a protest of patriarchal ideology about motherhood. She presents herself as a liberated woman rather than a submissive wife and loving mother. She disobeys the patriarchal rules made for women and starts her journey in search of meaningful personal and political life. All these

instances prove that Meridian underrates the patriarchal ideologies and actively resists the repression of patriarchal monocacy. Meridian confronts with her personal history, family history, and racial history. This confrontation shapes the way for self discovery of her self- hood and identity resisting the repression of different kinds while at home, college and community.

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