

# WALKER EMPOWERING WOMEN IN *MERIDIAN*

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## Abstract

*With the picture of personal struggle to overcome the patriarchal society, Alice Walker has concentrated on the empowerment of female values for the establishment and preservation of social and individual female identity in Meridian. Portrayed as a poor, uneducated, and a black girl, Meridian faces social and culturally harsh treatment and black males have behaved her as a toy resulting in double patriarchy. Her attachment with the Civil Rights Movement has brought a transformation and realization within her, which has ultimately enabled her to exist and revolt against male hegemony. Following the feminism as its theoretical tool, this research examines on how a neglected, uneducated poor black girl Meridian transfers herself into an independent woman having her own identity with representative character of an empowered woman. This article tries to examine how Walker has empowered females in the novel, Meridian.*

**Keywords:** womanism, feminist, empowerment, male hegemony, sexism.

## Introduction

Alice Walker, an African-American novelist, is well-known as one of the leading voices among black American writers. She has produced varied body of works, including poetry, novels, short stories, essays and criticism. In her writings, the struggle of black people throughout history is presented and praised for their insightful and riveting portraits of black life, in particular the experiences of black women in a sexist and racist society.

Walker's beginning days as a writer, were in the small rural town of Eatonton, Georgia, where she was the youngest of eight children of impoverished sharecroppers. Both of her parents were storytellers, and Walker was especially influenced by her mother, whom she described in *Our Mothers' Gardens* as a walking history of their community. A childhood accident at the age of eight left Walker blind and scarred in one eye, which, partially corrected when she was fourteen. This accident left a profound influence on her. Walker has commented that as a southern black growing up in a poor rural community, she possessed the benefit of double vision. As a reflection of her childhood experience, Walker's novel, *Meridan*, is related to social conditions that affect family relationships, in addition to her recurring theme of the suffering of black women at the hands of men. However, Walker is often faulted for her portrayal of black men as violent, an aspect which is frequently criticized in her work.

Walker was an excellent student, and received a scholarship to Spelman College in Atlanta, and later to Sarah Lawrence College in the Bronx, New York. While in college, she became politically aware in the Civil Rights Movement and participated in many demonstrations. Though Alice Walker has worked in a variety of genres, including children's literature, poetry, nonfiction, and screenwriting, she is best known for her novels, which give voice to the

concerns of an often doubly oppressed group, African American women. Walker returned to the South after college and worked as a voter register in Georgia and an instructor in black history in Mississippi. She was inspired by Martin Luther King Jr.'s message. She is best known for her Pulitzer Prize winning novel *The Color Purple*, which extends and solidifies many of the themes she first touched upon in her early work, which includes *Meridian*.

Walker's second novel, *Meridian*, explores one black woman's experience in the Civil Rights Movement, the psychological makeup of which fascinates Walker more than the political and historical impact it had. Structurally complex, the novel raises questions of motherhood for the politically-aware female, and the implications for the individual of being committed to revolution. *Meridian* exemplifies Walker's ability to combine the personal and political consciousness in fiction. In many ways, *Meridian* anticipates and paves the way for Walker's future preoccupations. It focuses on women's lives and examines how the past and the present interconnect and construct the future. *Meridian*, Walker's second work of long fiction, is set against the turbulent backdrop of the civil right movement, which gained force in the 1960s, triggering sit-ins, demonstrations, and protests against the racist and segregationist policies that controlled and shaped the lives of African American in the South.

A theme throughout Walker's work is the preservation of black culture, and her women characters forge important links to maintain continuity in both personal relationships and communities. Walker admires the struggle of black women throughout history to maintain an essential spirituality and creativity in their lives, and their achievements serve as an inspiration to others. Walker's women characters like Meridian and Celie display strength, endurance, and, resourcefulness in confronting and overcoming oppression in their lives. Walker is frank in depicting the devastating circumstances of the twin afflictions of racism and sexism.

In her writings, she explores the, "issue of the spiritual survival of black people, in particular, black women" (In search 150). In her essay, she writes, "I am preoccupied with the spiritual survival whole of my people. I am committed to explore the oppressions, the insanities, the loyalties and the triumphs of black women" (192). Walker sees her writing as a way to correct a song that she observes in the world and has dedicated herself to delineating the unique dual oppression from which black women suffer: racism and sexism.

Her work is an exploration of the individual identity of black women and how embracing their identity and bonding with other women affects the health of her community at large. Walker describes this kinship among women as "womanism" as opposed to feminism. Walker focuses on life being saved through change and redemption. The redemptive quality in Walker's works goes beyond the thematic to the very heart of her aesthetics. Even when she writes passionately about problems that ravage the land and the lives of people, Alice Walker emphasizes the healing power of love and the possibility of change.

A tireless crusader on behalf of women, Walker in her later career has defended her work against censorship and has continued to speak out against the horrors of domestic violence, sexual abuse, and genital mutilation, a ritualistic practice employed by several native African cultures. Not precisely aligned with broad feminist concerns, Walker has often labeled herself a womanist, establishing her primary goal as a writer and individual to free women from oppression in all of its forms.

Walker's works are known for their portrayals of the African-American women's life. She depicts vividly the sexism, racism and poverty that make the life often a struggle. She also portrays the strength of family, community, self-worth, and spirituality. Walker's various aesthetic and social concerns are harmoniously combined in *Meridian*. Like Walker once was, *Meridian* is set on a path to greater self-realization and endures the hardships of firmly and irrevocably establishing her identity amid the chaos of social upheaval, sexual alienation, and people who are not always approving or supportive of either the woman or the cause.

*Meridian* is set in the American south during the 1960s and early '70s. The protagonist Meridian is a black woman from a southern suburb. She is forced into early marriage at the tender age of 16, has a child, gets a divorce and abandons her child. From her queerness, Meridian joins the Civil Rights Movement and also attends college. In this way, she cuts herself off from the oppressed male community of her nurture and traditional role. Through personal struggle and political involvement in the Civil Rights Movement, Meridian creates for herself the image her black foremothers.

The themes of Alice Walker are generally revolutionary and confront the contemporary experiences of black Americans, particularly those of black American women and their cultural, social and political history. She has claimed reputation for *Meridian*, particularly for her accurate analysis of dominated black women and her characterization of Meridian Hill. Most of the criticisms deal with existential crisis, psychological turmoil and deferred self in *Meridian*. In Melus, Donna Krolik Hollenberg has said about *Meridian*, "The story of a young black woman's struggle to find herself in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. Although its primary subject is the legacy of black women in sexist, racist America, the novel also tests the limits of cross racial relationships between two minority groups, Blacks and Jews." (31). In this reference, the novel not only talks about the context of black women, but also it deals with the cross-racial relationship.

*Meridian's* has undergone a struggle for personal growth is an alternative to the political movement of the 1960s. Walker herself was involved in Civil Rights Movement to show her place through *Meridian* in the novel. Karen Stein writes about *Meridian* as "The novel points out that the Civil Right Movement often reflected the oppressiveness of patriarchal capitalism" (130). This is the point to notice that the novel is a strong revolt against patriarchal domination.

Walker tries to depict the realities and hardships of black women. Her purpose is to foreground the dreams and failures of those people who have been dominated and pushed at the margin. Lynn Pifer writes in *African-American Review* that "Meridian's own mother, for instance, is an unhappy mother who manages to conform to the tradition only by suppressing her own emotions. She feels that she has been betrayed by other mothers" (34). He further sees *Meridian* as, "Full of victims of this tradition of Black Motherhood" (36). *Meridian* herself belongs to the worthless minority of mothers excluded by the tradition. Her own sacrifice of giving up her child is as painful and trying as any of the legendary sacrifices, but according to the code of the tradition, *Meridian's* attempt is not a sacrifice but a case of willfull neglect. Susan Danielson sees suppressed and dominated predicament of *Meridian* and her family and comments as "Meridian's family suffers from the racism and sexism that affects the larger community. The family's land is expropriated by the white community for a segregated park" (320).

He focuses his concerns towards male domination and how a black woman faces different problems even in her mid teens. He sees Meridian as a victim of social circumstances and individual shortsightedness. He further says that, “Meridian tells the story of Meridian Hill, a young black woman whose deeply rooted relationship with her community gives way to a struggle to reconcile her own cultural values with the values of Civil Rights Movement which has called her forth” (318). This novel therefore has focused on Meridian’s struggle as a journey from adolescence to maturity, emphasizing Meridian’s personal developments and salvation. One of the major issues in the novel is the fact that black women are often seen as little more than baby-making machine and Meridian tries break out of this stereotype by giving away her child and attending college.

## **Meridian as an Empowered Woman**

Meridian is a black woman of courage, devoting herself to the cause of the Civil Rights Movement, and erasing her personal life for the sake of securing a better life of freedom and equality for the black people, Meridian has attained a sense of wholeness. She creates a sense of community with her people by giving up on any possibility of “ownership” by men, including Truman, even after his divorce from Lynne and the murder of his daughter Camara. Meridian was stigmatized by the Saxon teachers and girls because, “It was kept secret from everyone that Meridian had been married and divorced and had a child. It was assumed that Saxon young ladies were, by definition, virgins. They were treated always as if they were thirteen years” (94). Her personal life has shown her that sexism and racism have entrapped black women in a double encoding system. Her struggle for selfhood represents the black woman’s resistance against the socioeconomic conditions reinforced by the colonialist representational paradigm. Meridian has carved out her own niche by sifting through her cultural heritage within a communal value-system. She reconnects with the black heritage and community in search for an Afrocentric consciousness and a meaningful life beyond the sexual needs of men. Meridian has the courage to resist society’s false definitions of black women.

Since the days of slavery, the African-American woman has always been the racial and sexual ‘other’ in a white patriarchal society. The economics of slavery has produced the normative stereotypical mental representations of black women in society. The discursive and social positioning of the black female slave as sexual and immoral object became a strategy for safeguarding the position of the white male master as free from moral responsibility. The black women were the asexual maternal slave who took care of cooking, while also teaching the black children their assigned place in the race hierarchy. Controlled by the white patriarchal ideology, these negative images shaped black women’s self-definition. The internalization of such images inevitably led to a negative self-perception, which not only affected black male/female relations, but also extends to the area of cultural conflict among members of the black community. The inability to share the mode of power appropriated by the white patriarchy forces the black women to redefine their self-images within the intra-cultural network of relationships. Lynn Pifer writes about how Meridian is molested by males as:

Meridian, in fact, has been emotionally starved shut. Her mother has refused to tell her anything about sex, and Meridian only learns about it when she gets molested in a local funeral home. Meridian begins her relationship with Eddie mainly because she wants a boyfriend to protect her from all the other men around. And the demise of their relationship comes about when Eddie finally notices that Meridian does not enjoy having sex with him. (83)

Walker's women characters display strength, endurance, and resourcefulness in confronting and overcoming oppression their lives. It is difficult for Meridian to see why a black man would be interested in white women, since she is not interested in white men. Black women's historic experience of rape by the white slave master and Meridian's mother's stories of white men's and boys' expectation that she, that all black women, would be sexually available to them, make it unthinkable to Meridian for a black woman to be interested in white men. Meridian, in consciously creating herself in the image of her black foremothers, identifies with their experience of rape by white men. Immersed in racial and gender oppression, her life is pitted over others' pain. Donna Krolik Hollenberg writes about the domination of the black males and regression of black sexual identity as " ... Despite her own minority status, Lynne has a higher place than Meridian in the sexual hierarchy because she is white" (32). The relationship between black men and white women is explored. Meridian fails to understand Truman's interest in white women because she does not consider that the historic relationship of black men to white women was different from that of black women to white men. White women were forbidden to black men during slavery. After slavery, lynching and the threat of lynching were used to "protect" white women from "rape" by men and to terrorize all black people.

Young Southern black men in Meridian, described as "native" and "country boys", see Lynne as "a Route to Death, pure and simple," when they first meet her (137). But Truman, who is more sophisticated and a Northerner, is interested in white women precisely because they have been forbidden to black men. Truman is divided against himself, rejecting Meridian for Lynne and other white women, yet affirming the beauty of black women in his art and wanting Meridian as an assertion of his blackness. Meridian Hill has been conditioned by her community's patriarchal institutions to repress her individuality and, above all, not to speak out inappropriately. Walker posits Meridian's struggle for personal transformation as an alternative to the political movements of the 1960s, particularly those that merely reproduced existing power structures.

Truman's relationship with Meridian is concerned with self-hatred and hatred of one another in relationships between black men and women. It was the rhetoric of black consciousness, created by the Civil Rights Movement. Truman's inner conflict is expressed mainly in his fixation on the women in his life and the grip that they have on him. Truman subscribes to traditional notions of gender roles, in which the man is the dominant force in a relationship, and his assumptions of male dominance are the source of his arrogance and short-sightedness.

Truman expects Meridian to uphold a standard of purity that he does not apply to himself, and in this way, he is a victim of the sexual attitudes of his world and times. He is drawn to powerful, intelligent, and charismatic women who only reveal the conflicted and confused man who exists beneath the dominant and stereotypical male behavior. Truman also struggles with his relationship to black culture. His interest in the movement, to which he initially dedicates much time and interest, sours. Only when he is freed of the various confusing presences and influences that mark his life, Truman is able to confront himself as an individual and fill his life with purpose and meaning.

Meridian and Lynne represent two extremes, and Truman is drawn to each but is unable to commit to either. Meridian ultimately frees herself of his mercurial affections and his confusing presence, which are obstacles to her physical and emotional recovery. Initially, in their student days, she believes that Truman is guilty of the same overly reductive and short-sighted racial patronages as Lynne, and that he fetishists Lynne's whiteness just as Lynne lives vicariously through his blackness. Truman can only objectify black women, casting them in mute marble or obsessively painting representations of Meridian that are far from the woman she actually is.

Truman calls attention to his blackness and Meridian, "I think I'm in love with you, African woman. Always have been"(115), and "you're beautiful. Have my beautiful black babies"(116). It is a bitter satire to Meridian that he says these words to her after he has stopped seeing her to date white exchange students and after she has had an abortion and has been sterilized. Truman dated white women, "and so obviously because their color made them interesting-made her [Meridian] ashamed, as if she were less" (106). Later in the novel, Truman is surprised as "...Why, he had not known this woman at all! For the first time he detected a quality in Meridian that Lynne-who had known her only briefly-had insisted anyone could see" (141).

For Meridian to be a daughter of Harriet Tubman, a woman who frees herself and tries to free her people, she must give up her sexuality, as she has given up her mother. She must be alone, "that is my value" (220). Meridian, who chooses quest over romance, is more successful at creating herself than Lynne, who chooses romance over quest, who gives herself to Truman and is destroyed. Later Meridian becomes aware that the so-called intellectual climate offers a false definition of humanity. The climate does not even let the Sojourner, the symbol of an activist who worked against black enslavement to articulate the process of freedom. Seeing herself as the branch of the tradition the tree signifies, Meridian sets out for the South. She also gives up her relationship with Truman Hel, her fellow Civil Rights Worker.

It was not only white males that exploited black women. Black males were also equally hand in hand. The attempt by black men to subordinate black women was influenced, in part, by the ideology of the Nation of Islam. Attempting to subordinate black women was also a response by some black men to the growing feminist consciousness of young black women toward the end of the Civil Rights Movement. At that time, black women, like their foremothers in the Anti-Slavery Movement, began to see, in their relationship to the men in the Movement, an analogy to the racist oppression of black people. Writing about cultural invisibility and blindness based on racial identity, Deborah Barker writes:

While much critical attention has been focused on the interaction between music and language in African-American culture, the visual arts have been under-represented and under-analyzed. This is an especially egregious oversight, because the visual element of race is inexorably linked to racial identity. How one is seen (as black), and, therefore, what one sees (in a white world), is always already crucial to one's existence as an Afro-American. The very markers that reveal you to the rest of the world, your dark skin and your kinky/curly hair, are visual. (45)

The feeling that she had been part of her mother's slavery coincides with her own feelings as a young mother that motherhood is indeed slavery. The fact that her mother made it through pain, and endured, evokes in Meridian the fear of Black Motherhood, "that great institution" (96), her mother embodied. She rejects the roles of wife and mother, because she realizes that rigid role definitions are static and they deny human complexity and thereby suppress growth.

Meridian was taught at an early age by her mother not to trust white men. She was told that they like black women only for sex. Her grandmother told her not to trust white women, as the mothers of would-be white oppressors for whom black women were just domestic babysitters, namely the Mammy. She has also experienced sexual harassment by Mr. Raymonds, a married black university professor. She terminates her second pregnancy with an abortion, and has her tubes tied. She has control over her body, as she discards her image as a sexual object in the eyes of men:

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 never occurred to her that her mother's and her grandmother's extreme purity of life was compelled by necessity. They had not lived in an age of choice. (124)

Meridian Hill is a silent, eccentric, and determined woman who has held onto her strength and dignity despite many hardships she has faced throughout her life. Meridian's life is filled with many unique people and events that shape her into a seemingly confident and free woman. Meridian seems accepting of religion near the novel's conclusion. She in fact rejects traditional notions of God and is attracted to church instead by black voices singing in unison. Moreover, Meridian dismisses the notion of death as salvation. As she lies like dying on the floor in the closing chapters, Meridian remembers that black history has too many martyrs and leaves to regain her physical health.

## Conclusion

The novel, *Meridian* is about the personal struggle to overcome the patriarchal society. Meridian has undergone a complete transformation from a poor, uneducated black girl to an independent woman having her own identity. This transformation is the transformation of Walker herself because the whole novel deals with her own experience as a double colonized and dual oppressed woman in her society. The emergence of an emboldened woman, who speaks her own language, follows her own God and joins in Civil Rights Movement to make black revolutionaries, is itself a great question mark to the patriarchal society and this is the main theme of this article. Thus, the novel is a subtle representation of a tormented, subordinated, dominated and self-conflicting woman's psychology and frustration, isolation and rebellion that culminate in terrible action like revolt or death. It demonstrates a woman's self realization and establishment of self-identity.

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