



The Black Woman as Leader in Alice Walker's *Meridian*

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Abstract: *Alice Walker's second novel Meridian published in the year 1976, is set against the back drop of the Civil Rights Movement. It depicts the predicament of blacks in America during, and after the movement. It juxtaposes the black woman Civil Rights activist against the male activist. Above all, it foregrounds the contribution of black woman leadership as an essential pre-requisite for the emancipation of the black community. This paper focuses on the invaluable self-less contribution made by black woman activists like Meridian Hill to the Civil Rights Movement amidst politics of gender and race. It focuses on the point that black women are and have been self-less, benevolent leaders on par with men, in uplifting the black community towards egalitarianism and betterment. Meridian Hill actively participates in the Civil Rights Movement, and contributes her might to the upliftment of blacks, during and after the movement. After the movement, she heads to a small place like Chicokema and helps the black population there get their due rights, and overcome overt and covert segregation seen there, despite de-segregation. Walker through the novel argues that leadership is not about projection, reaping benefits or having an itch to lead, but is about creating a halo of awareness of their being, for those they lead, and enrich human lives around. The novel Meridian showcases the triumph of the black woman as a leader. Meridian emerges as a true leader of the masses, whose ultimate motto is serving the needy black population.*

Key Words: *Civil Rights Movement, Segregation, Black woman, Leader, Egalitarianism*

Narration

Alice Walker's second novel *Meridian* published in the year 1976 is set against the back drop of the Civil Rights Movement. It depicts the predicament of blacks in America during, and after the movement. It juxtaposes the black woman Civil Rights activist against the male activist. The novel brings into focus the invaluable contribution made by black women to the upliftment of blacks during, and after the movement. Above all, it foregrounds the contribution of black woman leadership as an essential pre-requisite for the emancipation of the black community. Walker as a youngster actively participated in the Civil Rights Movement, and this semi-autobiographical novel is based on her personal life experiences. The protagonist Meridian Hill like Walker, completes her education on a sponsorship, participates in the Civil Rights Movement, and voter registration drives and creates awareness about their being. Walker through the novel

has put forth that the Civil Rights Movement has been one of utmost turmoil and upheaval for blacks in America, as they fought for their rights, against white, supremacist society. Black men have had to only fight with racism, while black women have had to fight with racism and sexism within, and outside the movement.

The white supremacist society belittled black women, so did their black other halves. Moreover, black women had meagre sources of income and free time to try other things, and fight against their multi-pronged oppression. The novel showcases how difficult a thing it has been for black women, to contribute their might to the Civil Rights Movement, and endure the wherewithal associated with it, amidst racism, sexism, classism and utmost poverty. Though slavery was abolished in 1865, blacks in America could not get their rights, at least on paper till the Civil Rights Movement happened. The Civil Rights



Movement brought into focus in the novel, lasted for more nearly fifteen years from 1954 to 1968 in America. It was certainly one of utmost turmoil in American society, as well as the lives of blacks in America. The movement gave blacks freedom from overt segregation, and made them citizens of America in the true sense. After the movement, blacks certainly came out of the fangs of Jim-Crow laws, and sordid conditions that un-energised them for centuries.

Walker has talked about the significance of the Civil Rights Movement in the essay "The Civil Rights Movement: What Good Was It?," in her seminal text *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (1984). She has said that "the Civil Rights Movement is only dead for the white media." (Walker *In Search* 120). In the aforesaid collection of essays, Walker observes that the movement has been a great boon to the black community in America, as it unified blacks in America and made them seek their legitimate rights. She talks of it as a movement, beyond victories, quasi victories, and land mark moments. She argues that the movement brought together the black community. It breathed life into the lives of blacks, who were upset with their plight in America. Walker has acclaimed the movement by stating that, "If knowledge of my condition is all the freedom I get from a "freedom movement," it is better than unawareness, forgottenness and hopelessness, the existence that is like existence of a beast" (Walker *In Search* 121). As stated by Walker, the Civil Rights Movement made blacks in America aware of their condition, and made them seek and achieve freedom from their "second-class status" (Walker *In Search* 121).

Walker through the novel has envisioned that real changes in the black community can only happen, when the community itself undergoes a social and soul transformation. The novel reiterates the importance of female participation in the transformation of the black

community through the character of Meridian Hill, the female hero of the novel. Walker through the novel has brought into focus, the kind of leadership that can really bring in a positive change for the black community. Doug Mc Adam in *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency (1930-1970)* has defined leadership as "a resource whose availability is conditioned by the degree of organization within the aggrieved population" (48). Meridian becomes a leader who is a resource and receptacle of awareness, and action through intellect and activism like Alice Walker. The black community in America has been in search of black leaders who would consistently work for the upliftment of the black community. The unacknowledged truth is that, women who were such leaders were relegated in the movement to peripheral roles. "All over . . . whatever the man said had to be right. They had the whole say. The woman couldn't say a thing" (C. Brown 1986, 79). Despite this, black women have contributed their might to the movement, as this alone would uplift the black community. As pointed out by Lauret, it is to be noted that:

in this novel it is Civil Rights, not feminism, that brings the African American woman as historical subject and agent of change into being. Walker invokes her gender politic (womanism) from that of white women (feminism), by invoking a long history of Black female spirituality, suffering and strength which is rooted in community and folk-culture, which projects that suffering yields wisdom and self-determination. (Liberating 125)

Walker through the novel puts forth the idea that the movement was a success not only because of men, but even women. The novel *Meridian* is Walker's dedication to the precious, unacknowledged contribution made by black women. Through the novel, Walker claims "history of the Civil Rights Movement form its famous male leaders(Martin Luther King, James Forman, Bob Moses, Bayard



Rustin) for its female activists and organisers (Ruby Doris Smith Robinson, Ella Baker, Flo Kennedy, Fanny Lou Hamer, Rosa Parks) (*Laurel Liberating* 125). This paper focuses on the invaluable self-less contribution made by black woman activists like Meridian to the Civil Rights Movement, amidst politics of gender and race. It focuses on the point that black women are and have been self-less, benevolent leaders on par with men, in uplifting the black community.

The Civil Rights Movement has had invited active participation from educated black youth to contribute their might for the upliftment of the black community. Many student organisations like SNCC or Student Non-violent Co-ordinating Committee played a major role in mobilizing the black community. During the movement, black students like Meridian played a major role in mobilizing the black community to claim their rights. Meridian becomes part of “a group of students, of intellectuals, converted to a belief in violence only after witnessing the extreme violence, against black dissidents, of the federal government and the police” (Walker *Meridian* 15) only to shun violence totally. Meridian and her friends in her native place participate in the movement as they expect it to change their lives forever. Her co-students and friends, Ann Marion and Truman don’t mind taking up violence to better the stance of blacks in America, while Meridian shuns violence of any sort, but dreams for a true revolution. As pointed out by Stein “Walker’s novel affirms that it is not by taking life that true revolution would come about, but through respect for life and authentic living of life . . . gained only through each individual’s slow, painful confrontation of self” (140). Meridian as a youngster realizes that her “role is that of nurturer, protector, and culture-bearer” (Byerman 102). She, prefers taking up the path of educating blacks in America, to better their lives and making them know their rights. As succinctly asserted by Gerri Bates the novel

“Meridian reflects the issues of activism, its significance and value” (Bates 86).

Meridian on initially joining the movement does not think of taking up any leadership role. She only participates in the movement influenced by the magnetic pull of the movement. She is left aghast seeing the sexism in the movement, but sticks to it, despite her mother’s stern warning that she is wasting time, participating in the movement. Meridian sticks to the movement though the men holding key posts side-line women activists like her. Meridian’s co-Civil Rights workers Swinburne, Chester Gray and Truman Held are least interested in knowing who she is, but assign her some menial work to do. They expect her to do the assigned work without any question and doing so, they simply objectify her. Walker through then novel, has showcased how the Civil Rights Movement was marred by sexism and sexual politics. Women were given menial jobs in the movement, while men kept the important ones for themselves. Women Civil Rights activists like Meridian have dealt with it on the personal front, not to disturb the vigour of the movement. Notable Civil Rights activist Septima Clark has stated how black men never gave women a chance to lead. For black women it has been more like:

“You can work behind the scenes all you want . . . But don’t come forth and try to lead. That’s not the kind of thing they want [ed]” (qtd in Brown 77).

Participation in the movement heightens Meridian’s sensibility, about the plight of an average black person in America. She comes face to face with the real problems faced by the black population in America, the sordid conditions they live in, and their second class status. In the process of emancipating, the woes of the underprivileged black community in America, she becomes a true leader, par excellence. Walker through the novel depicts that leadership is more about doing and



accomplishing tasks, rather than commanding and leading. Moreover, Walker shows a successful black woman leader in Meridian Hill, who works for the upliftment of the black community rather than seeking name and fame.

Meridian's route to unselfish, yet unclaimed leadership has been no easy task for her. She gives up many things to uplift the black community despite her fragile health. Born into a black family with meagre income, she makes it to one of the prestigious colleges in Atlanta on the sponsorship of a white family. A truant, a teenage mother, a young black woman with no financial support, it becomes very difficult for Meridian to study and contribute to the upliftment of the black community, which she does unconditionally. The tussle with motherhood "inspires Meridian's commitment to the Civil Rights Movement. . . . Her efforts for the people and her overcoming of maternal guilt by interpreting those efforts as maternal have healed . . . her" (Byerman 101-102).

Meridian develops awareness about the plight of black women during the nebulous beginnings as an activist in her home town while still a student. This draws flak from her parents Mrs. Hill and Mr. Hill. Belonging to the earlier generation they find the endeavours of the younger generations extremely catatonic, as they don't sense that the black population in America can be free from white hegemony. They ascribe the pitiful state of affairs in the lives of blacks to divine providence and accept it as destiny. They never dare to question white hegemony. Mrs Hill chides Meridian for her foolishness, and tells her "God separated the sheep from the goats and black folks from the white. . . . It never bothered me to sit in the back of the bus, you get just as good a view and you don't have all those nasty white asses passing you." (Walker *Meridian* 81). The earlier generation of blacks never ever think that, there can be something like an egalitarian stance with whites, while young blacks like Meridian, Truman, Anne Marion, Chester

Gray, and Swinburne consider it as a definite possibility. Meridian not only thinks and dreams of egalitarianism, but also works towards it, and makes it possible.

Meridian attends Saxon College where bourgeois manners, ethics and values of chastity, piety, domesticity, and submissiveness which are pre-requisites of European super-macist womanhood are forcibly thrust upon young black women. Built and funded by the whites in America, it shuns the participation of its black students in the Civil Rights Movement. The bourgeois values keep the students locked in, and the black community out. Saxon college imparts so called humane European classical education, but puts away active collaboration with the black masses, with who they have to finally mingle. Meridian who comes from the black lower middle class, understands the plight of the less privileged black middle class and working class. She sees herself as one amongst the masses who has the liberty and need, to help those in need. Meridian least cares about the directives given by the college administration. She helps the black community around Saxon college in her own small ways, through voter registration rights, educating them, or changing the course of life of a black orphan child, called Wile Chile. Even as an incognito activist, Meridian "*envisions herself as a liberator-a constant force within the chaos of the masses*" (*Kalenda* 56).

Meridian as a Civil Rights activist faces all odds and demeaning situations. She puts forward a brave front and contributes her unquestionable might to the movement. She actively participates in voter registration drives, marches, and civil disobedience acts, to make blacks realize their rights. She does everything with utmost dedication and involvement that "whatever she was doing— canvassing, talking at rallies, tying her sneakers, laughing— . . . tears rolled slowly and ceaselessly down her cheeks. This might go on for days, or even weeks" (Walker



Meridian 80). Tears flow down her cheeks as she realizes the true situation of black lives in America. *"Walker through the novel has put forth the view "that would-be revolutionaries must avoid reproducing the power structures that they combat." From the novel it can be inferred "killing, for Meridian as well as for Walker, is an act of tyranny, even if one kills in the fight against tyranny" (Pifer 52).*

Walker through the novel, set way back during times of the Civil Rights Movement, projects that black leaders in America need to create an cognizance about the being and the living conditions of the black population, and help them better their living conditions and life styles, to create a harmonious equilibrium in American society.

After the Civil Rights Movement becomes a thing of the past, and many blacks reap the benefits of the movement, Meridian sticks to working for the upliftment of the black community. She moves to an under-privileged place called Chicokema where segregation is norm of the day even much later, after the movement. Walker through the novel stresses on the fact that, work has to be done form the grass root level to really uplift the black community. While her friends Truman, Anne Marion Coles, and Lynne reap the benefits of their activism and intellectualism, Meridian uses all her energies in bettering the lives of fellow blacks. As a college student she tells her friend "I'll go back to the people,, live among them like Civil Rights workers used to do." And when her friend asks her "You're not serious?" she replies " "Yes," . . . "I am serious" " (Walker *Meridian* 18). Meridian is a self-sacrificing black female activist, who takes up the ideological challenge of questioning and cajoling the hegemonic white bureaucracy, to uplift fellow black women and population. Walker through the novel focuses on the womanist thought that black intellectualism can do no good to blacks, if it is uprooted and set off form the black community

Chicokema is a very small town, where the benefits of the Civil Rights Movement haven't percolated to whom they have been intended for. Segregation is a way, even after the movement. The blacks in the small town still lead lives as second-class-citizens being valid legitimate citizens of America. The shame of segregation and discrimination are mutely borne by the black community without any questions. Moreover, the blacks there are not even aware of their rights. Poverty and illiteracy plague their everyday life. Meridian thinks of redressing the bureaucratic nonchalance in Chicokema *"when the officially sanctioned policies of the state seemed to partake of politicized hate" (Callahan 220).* Meridian takes up the onerous task of enlightening the black community about their basic rights in Chicokema, as it is very essential to create alertness about their being and plight.

Meridian challenges enforced segregation in the small town by taking a bunch of black children to see a mummy through the "still-as-death crowd of blacks" (Walker *Meridian* 7) on a day slated for whites, and succeeds in doing so. The act seems catatonic to Truman, as she faces guns, doing so. Meridian does so, to challenge white hegemony that stay puts segregation. The act done by Meridian Hill, gives the black community little hope, that better things can happen for them. In Chicokema, even the swimming pools and other government sponsored facilities are monopolized by whites. Blacks are banned from using anything meant for them. Walker in Chicokema has created a microcosm of rural America that hasn't harvested the benefits of the Civil Rights Movement, after the movement for a very long time. By doing so, she has shown how it took years together for the benefits of the movement, to reach the common black person in America. The condition of black ghettos is so worse that water floods them, leading to untimely deaths. Meridian works at the grass root level and slowly creates sentience about



their plight amongst blacks. Meridian tells her friend Truman “ ‘ Besides, revolution would not begin, do you think, with an act of murder—wars might begin in that way—but with teaching’ ”(Walker Meridian 192). She breaks unnecessary institutionalized segregation in the small town to a greater extent, and helps the black community around, enjoy few benefits meant for them.

Walker in the novel has replaced the traditional male hero with a strong female heroine like Meridian, to bring into focus the invaluable contribution made by black women for the upliftment of blacks in American society. As a youngster, Meridian and her friends have worked for the upliftment of fellow blacks. They bore beatings and arrests by rote to get egalitarianism for blacks in America. The unimpressive after-effects of the movement do no good to them. Walker through the novel has focussed on the point that educated, middle class black intellectuals have had the opportunity to harvest the benefits of the movement, but the common black person has faced umpteen difficulties to make a normal living. The blacks in Chicokema below the middle class, are not even aware of their rights. Whenever, some unexpected death happened in the community due to segregation and its effects:

“the people of the community habitually cried and took gifts of fruit and fried chicken to the bereaved family. The men stood about in groups, cursing the mayor and the city commissioner and the board of aldermen, whom they, ironically, never failed to refer as “the city fathers.” The women would sit with the mother of the lost child, and recall their own lost children, stare at their cursing husbands who could not look back at them—and shake their heads.” (Meridian 195)

As unrepresented masses, they barely realize that they are citizens of the United States with fundamental rights of their own. They are more

concerned with making both ends meet, rather than getting involved in knowing their rights or seeking equality. Meridian finally metamorphoses into a person with a resolution to stand for her people, against any sort of power. A person, who was formerly fed up with life and was aimless, nurtures a purpose, for which she can stand with utmost resolution. She takes the responsibility of serving her people and enlightening them, as this alone would change things and situations for posterity. She thinks:

“I am not to belong to the future. I am to be left to the old music beside the highway. . . . I will come forward and sing from memory songs they will need once more to hear. For it is the song of the people, transformed by the experience of each generation, that holds them together, and if any part of it is lost the people suffer and are without soul. If I can only do that, my role will not have been a useless one after all.” (p. 205-206)

Meridian makes Blacks in Chicokema realize their rights and claim them. She incessantly works towards her goals of enlightening them at the expense of her own failing fragile health. Walker in a way through the novel has projected the idea that only a true political change coupled with personal change alone can bring about the real change in the lives of blacks, against a rich racist society. At the same time, the novel presents the view that one has to improvise the personal facet of one's life for a better future. The novel projects the idea that *“The personal and the political are thus intimately bound up with each other” (Lauret Modern Novelists 63).*

Meridian's selfless service to the black community, is conceded and esteemed by the black neighbourhood that they “promise that they would name the next girl child . . . after her” (Walker Meridian 195). She instead asks them to claim their rights and help each other in bettering the black community, rather than naming children after her. Meridian shuns



materialism, combines black intellectualism and activism, and helps the black community in Chicokema as a black rights activist. Her life gets so entrenched in bettering the lives of fellow blacks that “she remains within the community and celebrates every day victories as well as defeats” (Kalenda 57). Meridian expects nothing in return for self-less service put forth by her, and takes a promise from the black people in Chicokema that “they would learn, as their smallest resistance to the murder of their children, to use the vote” (Walker *Meridian* 195). After having successfully induced the requisite level of consciousness in the black community in the place of her residence, Meridian prepares to go to a new place. Truman feels that she has been successful in knowing herself. He takes her place in Chicokema as the guardian of the black community. He embarks on a journey akin to Meridian’s journey. He tells Meridian “Your ambivalence will always be deplored by people who consider themselves revolutionists, and your unorthodox behaviour will cause traditionalists to gnash their teeth” (Walker *Meridian* 227).

Walker through the novel proposes that real changes can only happen for the black community in America, through continuous impetus and action. Though set amidst the Civil Rights Movement, the message imparted by the novel holds ground even today, as racism and sexism have become covert in America. Walker through the novel has put forth the view that when oppression is overt, one can fight against it, but when it is overt and multifarious, fighting it effectively becomes a difficulty. The modern black woman has a lot to learn from Meridian’s unflinching character. John Callahan commenting on the character of Meridian, in the novel, has rightly said that: “*although resolutions sometimes culminate in explosions, lasting change is prepared for by grubby actions like those Meridian performs in one little southern town after another. And true revolutions are never finished; like Meridian’s life and story, they illustrate an elliptical*

pattern of continual change” (224). Walker through the novel asks black women to be agents of positive change for themselves and the society at large. Meridian’s life is an instance that positive changes can happen in life when aspired and worked on for. The metamorphosis in Meridian’s character shown by Walker, from a looney woman abused on all fronts, to a woman torn by contrary instincts and finally to an emergent woman, who sticks to her convictions, and leads people with utmost resolve, is highly appreciable, and offers a positive lesson worth emulation.

Walker through the novel argues that leadership is not about projection, reaping benefits or having an itch to lead, but is about creating a halo of awareness of their being, for those they lead, and enrich human lives around. The novel *Meridian* showcases the triumph of the black woman as a leader. Meridian emerges as a true leader of the masses, whose ultimate motto is serving the needy black population. “*Meridian’s passivity can be seen as a mode of action, in the sense she acts as a catalyst for those around her; she leads by example rather than exhortation or authority*” (Lauret *Modern Novelists* 63). Walker through the novel has shown how benevolent, self-less and self-sacrificing black woman leaders have been during the movement and after. Meridian’s unflinching panache and penchant for self-less service can be gauged by what she tells Lynne Rabinowitz. She tells her friend and ex-Civil Rights worker Lynne that, people who lead, should do their bit and walk away. She tells her “King should have refused. Malcolm too, should have refused. All those characters in all those novels that require death to end the book should refuse. All saints should walk away. Do their bit, then-- just walk away” (Walker *Meridian* 155). Meridian is a role model black woman leader, who brings in positive changes in the lives of blacks. Meridian has envisioned that real changes in the black community can only happen when the community itself undergoes a societal and soul transformation. Furthermore, as a leader, she has put the



aforesaid practice into practise. Walker through the novel has stressed on female participation in the transformation of the black community. She has glorified the invaluable contribution made by black women to the Civil Rights Movement and the African American community in America.

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