

DYNAMICS OF DISSONANCE IN ALICE WALKER'S NOVEL "MERIDIAN".

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ABSTRACT

Alice Walker is best known for her fiction about the black women who achieve heroic stature within the confines of their ordinary day-to-day lives. The Afro-American women experienced the pangs of dissension engendered by racism and sexist violence within the community. This paper is primarily based on the selected novel of prolific Pulitzer Prize winner, Afro-American writer, Alice Walker who has explored the dynamics of dissonance plaguing the African-American communities in her works. Walker, whose life was profoundly transformed by her participation in the Civil Rights Movement, does not provide a romantic view of personal, social and political reconciliation and growth but transcends the barriers of gender to more universal concerns of 'individual autonomy, self-reliance and self-realization' in her second novel, Meridian. Through the accounts of the black civil activists, Meridian brings alive the various facets of violence and turbulence the Movement propagated. Meridian, the protagonist, struggles to overcome the paradoxical dissonance between politics and personality and struggles to change the oppressive nature of the society in order to ensure the full development of each individual whether male or female. Meridian's journey, both the external and internal explorations become an expression of the search for the African-American women's spirit, a spirit that leads the way for others to follow.

Walker, whose life was profoundly transformed by her participation in the Civil Rights Movement, does not provide a romantic view of personal, social and political reconciliation and growth but transcends the barriers of gender to more universal concerns of ‘individual autonomy, self reliance and self-realization’ in her second novel, *Meridian*. In protecting and nurturing her moral centre, she opines:

“I believe wholeheartedly in the necessity of keeping inviolate the one interior space that is given to all. I believe in the soul. Furthermore, I believe it is prompt accountability for one’s choices, a willing acceptance of responsibility for one’s thoughts, behaviour and actions, that makes it powerful. The white man’s oppression of me will never excuse my oppression of you, whether you are man, woman, child, animal or tall, because the self that I prize refuses to be owned by him, or by anyone.”ⁱ

Meridian bears witness to the testimony of her own ‘change, change personal’ and keeping to the central theme, quest for self identity, the novel records her ideological differences in many spheres. While analyzing the atmosphere of discord in the novel, we also get a deep and fresh incite into her disposition, from a frenzied revolutionist of the sixties to a mellowed down author who has transcended the status of a black female, daughter, wife and mother and has also achieved selfhood with a complete knowledge of one’s purpose in life. This transformation is confirmed through her protagonist, Meridian Hill, a representative of the 1980’s and which Walker sees as ⁱⁱ“the meridian of black awareness, when black Americans were able to see themselves clearly and a struggle for their identity.”

The first major discord that is highlighted in the novel is Walker’s own disappointment with the ideals of the Civil Rights Movement. Being a fiery activist of the movement in the sixties, she acknowledged the value of the Movement because it led to knowledge, hope and possibility for the black American. But later, she revised her opinion in the light of the evolving commitment to ‘womanism’, in that it continued to oppress women, and thus failed in its mission of human liberation. Secondly, the novel deals with the discords that Meridian experiences in her journey from adolescent unawareness to mature self-knowledge and from opposition with revolutionary vehemence to a spiritual vision. Thirdly, it looks at the myth of the “sacred calling” of motherhood and the discord between the myth and the reality of motherhood as experienced by

Meridian and her mother Mrs. Hill. It presents the conflict in women who break away from stereotype roles of ‘obedient daughters, dutiful wives, adoring mothers and lovers’. The novel also extensively deals with the discord present within the individual and the community that generates violence exerted by the whites and the blacks on each other and in particular, the role of blacks as collaborationists.

Walker’s message to overcome the strife in life, the resolutions of which she projects in the novel are: to be able to love and forgive unconditionally, embracing a mindset of universality; to transcend boundaries of race and sex by resisting rigid definitions of society and she substitutes the concept of revolution with the ideal of transformation. She also nourished and believed in the strong conviction that oral expression is basic to building both personal and communal identity. This helped shape Meridian, to regain her health and gain intellectual vitality only after she moved back among “the people” and learnt that “... it is the song of the people, transformed by the experiences of each generation; that holds them together, and if any part of it is lost, the people suffer and are without soul”.ⁱⁱⁱ

The first part of the novel describes Meridian’s origination into adulthood and the beginning of her search for her selfhood; The second part focuses on her renunciation of her child and her active participation in the Civil Rights Movement; and the third and final part deals with her release from sexual bonds with an “accent on her greater preoccupation with the survival whole” of her people. All these three parts of the novel exhibit dissonance in one or the other sense.

Born in a middle class family, Meridian is taught to accept a woman’s inferior status in society. She suffers from a mysterious disease of paralysis, fainting fits referred to as ‘her illness.’ After an early marriage and divorce, she gives up her child to accept a scholarship at the Saxon College. While in college, she becomes an active participant of the Civil Rights Movement. Here, she falls in love with a black political activist, Truman Held and conceives his child. She aborts and has a tube ligation as Truman gets involved with a white woman Lynne Rabinowitz and marries her. Facing rejection in love and sex, she analyses her feelings for men and realizes that sex for her ‘is a sanctuary from social pressure which unfortunately results in pregnancy’. She transcends the feelings of rejection and inadequacy by learning the true art of forgiveness.

Meridian and her mother are in conflict about Meridian's views on motherhood. She finds motherhood stifling and claustrophobic and maternal sacrifice is but another form of "slavery". Moreover, she did not want to rear her child in a society where black children are not particularly valued and impelled also by the need to save him from emotional deprivation that she herself has endured. The absence of a rapport between Meridian and her mother leaves a void in her life and is weighed down with the guilt for having betrayed the sacred call of motherhood at which her mother was exemplary. Though Walker agrees that motherhood in itself is not restrictive, she believes that it is a cultural institution that insists on female denial. She also maintains that, 'it is because of the little value that society places on children, especially black children; on mothers, especially black mothers, and on life itself.'

Meridian silences the communal voice of criticism and thoughts of suicide, by actively involving herself in the movement for racial equality and in combating several types of violence, she directly or indirectly fights on behalf of children whose lives she seeks to preserve. Observing the Truman-Lynne marriage collapse in front of her, she learns to forgive them unconditionally and becomes extremely protective of them when they lose their child Camara to the onslaught of racism. Thus she elevates her personal identity to a collective one and provides an incentive for personal and political change. Barbara Christian contends:

"Meridian's quest of wholeness and her involvement in the Civil Rights Movement is initiated with her feelings of inadequacy in living up to the standards of black motherhood. Meridian gives up her son because she believes she will poison his growth with the thorns of guilt and she has her tubes tied after a painful abortion. Again, Walker approaches the forbidden as a possible route to another truth."^{iv}

Meridian also comes in clash with her fellow revolutionaries whether she should 'kill' to uphold the directives of the Movement. Examining the relationship between violence and revolution, she arrives at the conclusion that it is essential to take life in order to preserve the sacredness and continuity of life, and to make it possible for future generations.

Disappointed with the objectives of the Civil Rights Movement that doesn't credit women with selfhood, Walker is discontent at the fact that a woman is reduced to a parasitic existence,

limiting her life's role to simply a sexual and biological function. She also draws parallels between the white women's liberation movement and the blacks struggle for total emancipation. The whites' oppression is simply due to male chauvinism and, therefore, has an extremely 'anti-male tone to their dissertations'. The black woman has a life and death struggle and must combat the capitalist and racist exploitation of the black people and the illusion of womanhood gets quickly dissipated at the degrading and dehumanizing jobs are relegated to the blacks, which are mostly maids and wet nurses in the homes of the whites.

Walker also criticizes black men who accuse that black women not only escape persecution, they even contribute to the emasculation of black men. While agreeing that black men have been murdered and abused, a blundering assault on mankind, it is a gross distortion of a fact to state that black women are manipulative. By reducing the black man to absolute tyranny, the black woman has no protector, and is vulnerable in her position as a scapegoat for the evils perpetrated by the racist and sexist system. She condemns the Movement for being chauvinistic in its approach of physical, psychological and economic exploitation of black women. .Gloria Wade Gayles comments on how the black women are oppressed further by slavery than their male counterparts. "In the institution of slavery, black people, regardless of sex or age, were slaves. In the institution of patriarchy, black women, regardless of age, are slaves." ^v

The resolution that Walker offers to outdo this dissonance is to envisage a new system. Unless women in any enslaved nation are completely liberated, the change cannot be called a revolution. Catching a glimpse of freedom and tasting a bit of self-determination, Meridian is unable to revert to the old routines that were established under a racist and capitalist regime. Her realization occurs when she aligns with the fact that 'to die for a revolution is a one-shot deal; to live for the resolution means taking on the more difficult commitment of changing life patterns'. Meridian is critical of the sexism within the Civil Rights Movement and subordinates the struggle within gender to the larger questions projected through her theory of 'One Life':

"For she understood, finally, that the respect she owed, her life was to continue...to live it... And that this existence extended beyond herself to those around her because, in fact, the years in America had created them One Life" ^{.vi}

Meridian struggles to change the oppressive nature of the society in order to ensure the full development of each individual whether male or female. In the words of Karen Stein, “the truest heroism lies not in external battle, as in wars which destroy the novel’s men, but in confrontation with the self”.^{vii}

Meridian realizes that her history is one of restriction and suppression. Her family relationships have led toward death of self rather than an affirmation of life. She is reminded of Louvinie, on whose ripped out tongue stands the “Sojourner Tree”, a sanctuary, where Meridian relegates herself to invisibility to overcome her feelings of guilt. To Meridian, the Sojourner Tree is a metaphor for ‘hope and regeneration and is the dead slave’s gift of life and eloquence’ to the black women to come after her. As Barbara Christian comments:

“Louvinie’s tragedy is transformed through the process of nature, into beauty, for although the Sojourner stands as a reminder of brutal slavery it stands nevertheless resplendent in its flowering.”^{viii}

Meridian’s conflicts are not only with external obstacles, but primarily with herself. She has her own shortcomings too. She can be ascetic, lonely and self-destructive. In the beginning of the novel, Meridian confronts an angry mob and an army tank as she leads a group of poor black children to view the mummified body of Marlene O’shay. Marlene O’shay was murdered by her husband when she stepped out of her stereotype roles of a dutiful wife and adoring mother to taste a little freedom. In displaying her mummified body for viewing, the American patriarchal society sends out its message loud and clear to women to stay within the boundaries.

Meridian rebels against the rigid social codes of the Saxon College that gives importance to superficiality at the expense of intellectual honesty and freedom. She revolts against any kind of cosmetic tradition that will mould her into an archetypal mask of beauty. Meridian is unable to forgive the housemother for thwarting her efforts of humaneness and compassion to rehabilitate the Wild Child, a street urchin. The Wild Child’s presence is a gross violation to the atmosphere at Saxon College and the housemother drives her to her death. Meridian also discovers that sexuality, like motherhood, may also lead to destruction as women are considered objects of gratification. Completely ignorant about her body and the nature of sexual relations between men

and women, she falls prey to promiscuity and unwanted pregnancy. Her discovery that she is pregnant shocks her, “She realized that her mother, father, aunts, friends, passers-by – not to mention her laughing sisters – had told her nothing about what to expect from men, from sex.”

^{ix}Her marriage with Eddie and her relationship with Truman Held inevitably dissolve.

Walker exhibits black violence in stark reality. At times, the blacks can stoop to the level of a collaborationist attitude in order to fulfill their selfish aims. Meridian realizes that Truman is symbolic of the Movement despite his honorable work for social justice; he harbours a patriarchal insensitivity towards women. He remains in conflict between his love for black women whom he romanticizes as fertile mothers and the white women whom he finds sexually attractive. Truman marries Lynne, a white fellow activist, only to enjoy the special privileges in white America. Tommy Odds uses Lynne as a scapegoat for all his rage against the white oppression. Lynne is exploited by black men and insulted by their wives who do not credit her sincere concern and love for the blacks. This episode depicts the blacks as perpetrators of base and criminal tendencies that anticipate any sort of mutual relationship.

At the end of the novel, Truman undergoes a transformation from ‘fragmentation to wholeness’. He reads the poems Meridian has left on the walls which state that forgiveness is the key to wholeness. Her personal possessions, a cap and dungarees, and a sleeping bag are symbolic of freedom, self-discovery and restoration that are left behind for Truman as a call to ‘his inner voice to communicate the spirit of change.’ He “wondered if Meridian knew that the sentence of bearing the conflict in her own soul which she had imposed on herself- and lived through – must be borne in terror by all the rest of them”. ^x

Through the accounts of the black civil activists, Meridian brings alive the various facets of violence and turbulence the Movement propagated. Meridian struggles to overcome the paradoxical dissonance between politics and personality. When she embraces a more secular religion, she realizes that her ‘identity is inextricably connected to her black heritage, her essential oneness with black humanity’ and reassesses her commitment to the racial struggle. She decides that she would kill only to protect lives. This realization gives her the confidence of “her worth, of her power, of her place in the sun.” A victim of psychological and political aggression, Meridian’s journey is both external, as she travels about the South, and internal, as she comes to

terms with the discords about death, life, sex, love, motherhood, violence and change. Her internal exploration is an expression of the search for the African-American women's spirit, a spirit that leads the way for others to follow.

ⁱ Alice Walker. *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*. Pocket Books: New York, 1970. p. 5-6.

ⁱⁱ Frank N Magill, *Masterpieces of African-American Literature*. New York: Harper Collins, 1992, p.303.

ⁱⁱⁱ Alice Walker, *Meridian*, London: Phoenix .1976. p. 221

^{iv} Barbara Christian, *Black Women Novelists: The Development of Tradition. 1892-1976*. Westport Ct:Green Wood Press. 1980 p.15.

^v Gloria Wade Gayles, 1990. *Black Southern, Womanist: The Genius of Alice Walker*. In *Southern Women Writers: the New Generation*. Ed. Tonete Bond Inge. Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama. p. 301-323.

^{vi} Alice Walker, *Meridian*, London: Phoenix, 1976. p. 204

^{vii} Toure Sekou, *America On Walk: Revolution and Religion*, International Ideological Symposium, Conakry, Guinea, November 13-16, 1978, p.16.

^{viii} Barbara Christian, *Black Women Novelists: The Development of Tradition. 1892-1976*. Mary Evans. Garden City, N.Y. Double Day/Anchor. 1984. p.216.

^{ix} Alice Walker, *Meridian*, London: Phoenix, 1976. p.60

^x Alice Walker, *Meridian*, London: Phoenix, 1976. p.242

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