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The Cataclysmic Experience of Dehumanization in Alice Walker's *Meridian*.

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Abstract:

The main objective of the research article is to find out the oppression of blacks in American society. This article deals with Alice Walker's second novel *Meridian*. The novel portrays the sufferings of blacks from the hands of white in the background of 1960's Civil Rights Movement. Walker explores black woman's experience in the Civil Rights Movement, fascinates Walker more than the political and historical impact. Meridian's personal and other blacks sufferings are discussed in this paper. Alice Walker deals with blacks issues which is the dehumanization in America.

Key words: blacks, sufferings, Civil Rights Movement, oppression, dehumanization, etc.

African American history begins with the importation of African slaves by European colonizers into the "New World" beginning in the seventeenth century. The story continues through the abolition of slavery into an unstable period toward the end of the nineteenth century when black Americans no longer had status, yet faced abhorrent discrimination. The early twentieth century saw the Great Migration of more than a million African Americans from the agrarian South to cities in the industrial North. Following the two world wars, black Americans concentrated on attaining what came to be known as civil rights, and the passage of anti-segregation legislation in 1954 and voting rights legislation in the mid- 1960s were steps in the direction of long overdue racial equality. There was considerable turbulence in the 1960s as evident in the assassination of prominent black leaders Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr. The following research paper points out the above said.

Alice Malsenior Walker born on February 9, 1944, in Eatonton, Georgia and lives in Northern California, she has won the Pulitzer Prize and the American book award for her novel *The Color Purple*. She has written many novels, several collections of short stories, essays and poetry, as well as children's books.

Alice Walker's *Meridian* constructs of small 'chapters' that make up the novel, as Walker has said, pieces of cloth compose a quilt. *Meridian* is a heartfelt moving story about one woman's personal revolution as she joins in the Civil Rights Movement. The novel sets in the American South in the 1960s it follows Meridian Hill, a courageous young activist who dedicates herself heart and soul to her civil rights work, touching the lives of those around her even as her own health begins to deteriorate. It is a lonely battle but it is one Meridian will not abandon, whatever the costs. The story deals with love, courage and discrimination. Mary Donnelly says that the process of identifying and celebrating resistance place a major role in Alice Walker's works. Resistance, humanism, spirituality, nature and womanism are the aspects that Walker discusses in her works. Donnelly says, *Meridian* is a taut, non chronological, narrative of the journey of a young woman in and out of the movement and involves in interracial issues, the right role of violence in addressing social wrongs, and the mystical power of nature.

While Truman Held enters the small town of Chicokema, he asked the sweeper one who sweeps there, whether the situation changed after the Civil Rights Movement. The sweeper answered "I seen rights come and I seen 'em go" (*Meridian* 3). He says about the situation of the black folks as "you'd know this is for the folks that work in that guano plant outside town. Po' folks"(4). The blacks are allowed to work in the guano plant which smells worse than a dead fish.

Meridian's father's grandfather acquired the sixty acres of Cherokees land after the Civil War, but the land deed was given to Mr Walter Long Knife, the Cherokee by *Meridian*'s father. Channette Romero says, In the interim, *Meridian*'s parents debate Americans' and African Americans' implication in the dispossession of Native lands; *Meridian*'s father says, "we've been a part of it, everybody's been a part of it for a long time"(49). The scene allows the text briefly to celebrate the power of Native religion, and to examine how both African Americans and Natives have been negatively affected by colonialism in America.

Meridian's father farmed in that land. The land is called Indian burial mounds of the Sacred Serpent. It was attracted the white government.

One day when she was helping her father tie up some running beans, three white men in government-issued trucks-army green with white lettering on the side-came out to the farm. They unloaded a large wire trash basket and two brown picnic tables. They said a bulldozer would be coming the next day. The Indian burial mounds of the sacred serpent and her father's garden of prize beans, corn and squash were to be turned into a tourist attraction, a public park (49).

Meridian's father went to the county court with his deed for justice, the officials said they could offer token payment. The government officials warned them to stay away from the Sacred Serpent Park. The land belongs to the public and the blacks were not allowed to enter the Sacred Serpent Park. "When her father went to the county court house with his deed, the officials said they could offer only token payment; that, and the warning

to stay away from Sacred Serpent Park which, now that it belonged to the public, was of course not open to colored”(49). The white government has done the injustice to the blacks. Tiya Miles and Sharon Holland claim Walker’s meditation on Natives, reveals a special, albeit problematic, attachment to Indian peoples and places.

At the age of twelve Meridian Hill was sexually exploited by the child molesters namely Dexter and his assistant. So she has a psychological problem over the childhood memory.

When Meridian was studying in school Eddie loves her and the both got married and she is pregnant, so that she was expelled from the school. “She was expelled from school because of the pregnancy”(58). After she gave birth to Eddie Jr, Eddie left her alone. On that time she was watching television, there was an advertisement for the Voters Registration drive. Meridian says that Blacks were not allowed to participate in the Media, such as advertisements and News. “Black people were never shown in the News – unless of course they had shot their mothers or raped their boss’s grand parent – and a black person or persons giving a news conference was unheard of“(69).

Meridian had a chance to study in Saxon College, while she was studying she was participated in Civil Rights Movement and Voters Registration drive. Meridian learns from her mother’s great – grand mother’s history, she learnt that if a person has education and employment one can own freedom. She says mother’s great-grand mother earned money from paintings and decorations on barns. “She earned money...and was allowed to keep some for herself. With it she bought not only her own freedom,...”(128). *Meridian* showcases both the struggle and the emphasis of ‘self-knowledge and love’. Barbara Christian observes, “Meridian’s quest for wholeness and her involvement in the Civil Rights Movement is initiated by her feelings of inadequacy in living up to the standards of Black motherhood”(465)

Alice Walker framed the word “Womanism” and her Womanist novel *Meridian* is part of the endeavor. The word “Womanist” gives equal importance to race and gender: a “Womanist” is “a black feminist or feminist of color,” who is “committed to (the) survival and wholeness of (the) entire people, male and female” (Gardens xi). In choosing the word “Womanist” rather than “feminist” Walker expresses her feeling of separation from white feminists who fail to consider race, and her feeling of exclusion, as a woman and a feminist, by black nationalist men. Madhu Dubey, in *Black Women Novelists and the Nationalist Aesthetic*, sees African American Women novelists of the 1970s, including Alice Walker, was attempting to create a place for black women in the masculinist black nationalist discourse. At the beginning of the novel, she is a

broken and damaged individual, mourning a love and loss she cannot verbalize. At the end, she emerges hale and healthy, thanks to her struggles and the hard-won wisdom she has acquired along the way. Meridian ultimately realizes that no one person, movement, or institution can offer her the assistance she seeks, and she finally turns to herself. Meridian's journey to self-discovery is marked by physical and sexual abuse, a broken marriage, and a child she decides to give away. Her strange illness is in some ways a manifestation of her instability and insecurity. Her bouts of lost consciousness and episodes of paralysis signal that she is a woman without an identity or a sustaining in her life. Ultimately, she realizes that her power lies in her unique and unwavering courage.

Meridian decides, "I'll go back to the people, live among them, like Civil Rights workers used to do" (19). Once she returns to living in poor communities with people of color, again she is able to participate in hands on resistances to racism and oppression, activities that have immediate benefit in peoples' lives. *Meridian* highlights the importance of not only possessing political consciousness, but also using it to enact direct, immediate social change. According to Alice Walker with the education and employment one can overcome the dehumanization of whites in the society.

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