



## A Critical Commentary on *Meridian*

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### Abstract

The Afro-American woman bore a double-edged persecution: one, as a worker, both in the house as well as in the fields; two, as an object of sexual exploitation. She was seen as an over-sexed, immoral, loose woman who was always available for instant sexual gratification, as well as for the procreation of the race, thereby ensuring an unfailing supply of human beings for the ever-increasing needs of capitalist machinery. The poor black woman slave was thrust under by a capitalist society which saw her as an inexpensive commodity, and therefore utilized her to the utmost, without any sense of guilt. The black woman was considered an evil incarnate, robbing white women of their men as well as corrupting a whole way of life. The oppressions and triumphs of Black women are marked in *Meridian*. There are four major characters: Meridian, her mother Misses Hill, her lover Truman and Lynne. As an apologist Walker writes for the cause of liberation of Black Womanhood.

Keywords: Apologist, Crazy quilt, Commemorative, Interracial, Sanctuary, Underscore.

In *Meridian* Alice Walker has written a nice, taut novel that accomplishes the needs of an age. The issues she is concerned with are massive. Events are strung over twenty five years. They occur between the height of the civil rights movement and the present. However, her method of compression through selection of telling movements and her freedom from chronology create a lean book containing 228 pages which flow like clean water.

“Although this is only Alice Walker’s second novel it is her sixth book. She has published poetry, short stories and a study of Langston Hughes. She writes with a sharp critical sense as she deals with the issues of tactics and strategy in the civil rights movement, with the nature of commitment the possibility of interracial love and communication, the vital and lethal strands in American and Black experience, with violence and non violence and self hatred.” (Piercy 9)

In spite of many sharply sketched minor characters for example the young woman dying of a kidney ailment who says, “Don’t sit here...You blocks my view of my husband”, there are only four important characters; Meridian’s mother, Mrs. Hill, dour, hardly religious, frightened and unloving; Lynne, a Jewish civil rights worker who marries and loses Truman, a painter, who shifts and slides with the times: and Meridian herself, a black woman who cannot lie and for whom ideas are simply real and to be acted upon. Walker works out through a ten year long triangle, of Meridian, Truman and Lynne- their misadventures, their ability and inability to love or forgive each other, the dreadful belief of how they flay and feed and comfort by turns. Meridian has been passionately in love with Truman. He leaves her for Lynne whom he later abandons along with their daughter Camara. By the time he wants Meridian, she no longer wants him because her life of total commitment to struggle in the black small town of the South is meaningless to him, a commercial artist. Lynne cannot go back to where she came from and she does not belong in the black community either.

The oppressions and triumphs of black women are marked in *Meridian*. Meridian Hill is engaged in search for selfhood by discovering meaning in her roots and traditions. She continues the struggle against the oppression of black women, of which Ruth in *In the Third Life* dreams about. As she struggles, to reclaim her past and re-examines her relationship to the black community, she gains internal strength to endure hardships. *Meridian* is a maturation novel. It is an examination of Meridian’s growth, her movement into womanhood and her emergence as a strong woman. Walker constructs for her protagonist a lonely pilgrimage. It encompasses elements of the universal mono-myth: initiation, renunciation, atonement and release. Throughout the book the liberating goal of the pilgrimage is stressed by symbols and images related to slavery and freedom. The quest is for self knowledge, for wholeness that leads to transcendence as Meridian finally discovers herself and her relationship to the world at large.

*Meridian*, refers to the sun at noon in the middle of the day, when the light is brightest and there are no shadows. This recalls a quote from Camus with which Miss Walker opened her first book of poems,

“Poverty was not a calamity for me. It was always balanced by the richness of light...Circumstances helped me. To correct a natural indifference, I was placed half way between misery and the sun. Misery kept me from believing that all was well under the sun, and the sun taught me that history wasn’t everything.”

In New York a group of black women veterans of marches and voter registration campaigns in the South are recommitting themselves to their rebellion, putting rebellion as they had understood it. The question each must answer is whether she will kill for the revolution. It seems like an easy necessary question. Annie Marion, *Meridian*’s friend from their days at black women’s college in Atlanta, presses *Meridian* to say yes. But *Meridian* cannot get the word out. She doesn’t really know why there is some depth of knowledge she lacks will perhaps always lack, which she senses is a pre-requisite to murder. They pressed her to answer the question, “Will you kill for the revolution?” with a positive yes. As they were waiting for her to speak she recalled a past experience. She remembered her mother and the day she lost her. Her mother’s love was withdrawn when she was thirteen. Her sense of alienation and isolation had deepened. Knowing that she was not whole, because at thirteen she had not come to grip the whole truth about herself, she began a search for freedom. Coming back to the present, she replies like a true revolutionary that she would reject violence as the approach to change. She prefers non violence because she is

“held by something in the past by the memory of old black men in the South...and the sight of the young girls singing in the country choir, their voices the voices of the angels.” (*Meridian* 28).

While answering Claudia Tate, Alice Walker says;

“When I wrote *Meridian* I realised that the chronological sequence is not one that permits me the kind of freedom I need to create and I wanted to do something like a crazy quilt..... You know there is a lot of difference between a crazy quilt and a patchwork quilt. A patchwork quilt is exactly what the name implies-a quilt made of patches. A crazy quilt on the other hand only looks crazy. It is not patched. It is planned. A patchwork quilt would perhaps be a good metaphor for capitalism: a crazy quilt is perhaps a metaphor for socialism. A crazy quilt story is one that can jump back and forth in time and work on many different levels, and one that can include myth. It is generally much more evocative of metaphor and symbolism than a novel that is chronological in structure, or one devoted, more or less, to rigorous realism as in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*.”

Walker arranges the narrative material in the novel in the form of "a crazy-quilt story" (Tate: 176). The narrative strands jump back and forth in time. They work on many different levels and form a complex structure. The personal histories of Anne-Marion Coles, *The Wild Child*, Meridian's father's grandmother, Feather Mae and the legend of the sacred tree Sojourner are interspersed with the past of Meridian's parents, Mr. and Mrs. Hill. All of these provide with insight into the various layers of black experience. On her college campus there was giant magnolia tree that Meridian loved. In a campus riot her fellow students, destroyed the tree. There was a story behind it. When the campus was a plantation a slave named Louvinie, born in West Africa would entertain the children, black and white, with horror stories. In the midst of one such story the youngest child of the plantation owner dropped dead.

"Louvinie's tongue was clipped out at the root. Choking on blood, she saw her tongue ground under the heel of Master Saxon. Mutely, she pleaded for it, because she knew the curse of her native land: Without one's tongue in one's mouth or in a special spot of one's one choosing, the singer in one's soul was lost forever, to grunt and snort through eternity like a pig."

The Master kicked Louvinie's tongue to her. Later during an eclipse, "she buried it under a scrawny magnolia tree on the Saxon plantation". If the question of murder is the question of knowledge and if experience is knowledge then inherent in Meridian's genealogy and in the legends to which she has attached herself is a knowledge that she cannot match. All this, along with a connections that her parents have made and the connections that Meridian is being asked to make-connections to the grace of gospel music, to damnation by the crimes of history, to the purgatory of committing oneself to murder-is out of her search. She says no to her group and the group expels her.

The group in a sense expels Meridian from history which she has made along with its members. It cuts off the road she has been travelling since the movement first came to her town. She was a seventeen year old child mother with a boy husband, apparently trapped in dull, cramped rhythms of social and economic poverty-rhythms she barely perceived. The movement gave her a chance to start life afresh. There was a quality of intelligence in it, a refusal to accept most of what she took for granted. She was more than fit for the work that was being done. She gave up her baby, divorced her husband, went to college, demonstrated, was beaten and arrested and took risks. In New York out of the movement stranded by her co-workers and estranged from the momentum of events she had helped to set in motion she begins a third time. She decides to go back South and live there with her own people; "Like civil rights workers used to do".

*Meridian* makes a parable more than a mere novel or trades the prosaic for an inert symbolism. It intends to elevate the story. In an early chapter *Meridian*, aged seven finds a gold bar and rushes with it to her parents; they ignore her. She buries the gold, a symbol of her unrecognized gifts, and finally forgets about it. In college as *Meridian* lies sick in bed a halo forms around her head. Back in the south after the meeting in New York she works alone persuading people to register to vote, organizing neighbourhoods around local issues and staging protests. She calls them ‘performances’. This is beautifully presented and is utterly convincing. Each incident is memorable shaped as a story in itself. But after every performance *Meridian* falls to the ground paralyzed and must be carried like a corpse back to wherever she is living.

Ten years after leaving the group of women in New York *Meridian* discovers in church that she can kill. It is a strange church. The minister acts out arrogantly. It seems the role of Martin Luther King Jr. long after his death. But nobody is put off. *Meridian* touches as she had not been able to live up to the knowledge that she had sensed thinking back over her ancestors, when she said no, in New York. For what else had she been doing with her life ever since. But like this minister and his congregation, keeping something alive by acting it out.

The quality of pain, the insistence on a history without gaps and her own recognition of her well earned place in that history is what *Meridian* can kill for.

“To boast about this new capacity to kill- which she did not after all admire- would be to destroy the understanding she had acquired with it. Namely this: that even the contemplation of murder required incredible delicacy as it required incredible spiritual work. And the historical background and present setting must be right. Only in a church surrounded by the righteous guardians of the people memories could she even approach the concept of retaliatory murder. Only among the pious could this idea both comfort and uplift. (*Meridian*)”

Greil Marcus writes in *The New Yorker*:

“It seems clear as *Meridian* makes this connection as time goes on, loses it, regains it, loses it again, that the spiritual necessities that make it possible for her to say yes to murder will be negated should she ever commit murder: that should she kill, her life would be over.” (15)

*Meridian*’s role in the play she has devised for herself with in a larger history-the speech her actions give-stands out with great attention, “does the end justify the means?” Camus wrote in ‘Thought at the *Meridian*’,

“That is possible. But what will justify the end? To that question which historical thought leaves pending rebellion replies the means.”

Walker consciously rejects death. Meridian's political commitment is not to end in martyrdom: there have been too many martyrs to her cause. Still we need some other equivalent of death or marriage to round off a tale and Walker has not found one here. We are told that Meridian has brought off a successful change from victim to a fully responsible protagonist: that she no longer needs punish herself physically, have fits, go blind because she acts for her people and herself and that she believes she could kill if she must to prevent more martyrdom, but telling is not enough. She has ceased to be one sort of committed person and become another. Some act is needed to make real the change. It is not there.

The chapter "Indian and Ecstasy" focuses on Meridian's loving relationship with her father and her spiritual communion with him. This spiritual experience down the Serpent's side gives Meridian the feeling of flying. It is their tangible connection to the past. It is through her relationship with her father that the seeds of her spiritual growth are sown. Within the narrative presentation of the complex material, the early experiences of Meridian are described. They are trying and painful. No one in her family had taught her what to expect from men, from sex. The lascivious Daxter, the incharge of the funeral home, pursues Meridian when she was only twelve. She sees his assistant's seduction of another school girl. Still she is unaware of her physical vulnerability and acquires a young boyfriend, Eddie. She marries her lover and awaits the birth of her son. Her whole life is changed by an experience she did not enjoy.

Meridian sees sex as a "sanctuary". Once in her sanctuary Meridian wonders if she could "look out at the male world with something approaching equanimity, even charity; even friendship" (*Meridian* 62). Her marriage with Eddie falls apart because she feels that as a wife her life will always be empty and she cannot diminish her "self." Besides, Eddie, like his name, "would never be grown up" (*Meridian* 70). Now the focus turns to Meridian's motherhood. Walker presents a cultural context in which motherhood becomes a vehicle for rebellion. She employs two frames: the outer frame demonstrates that the culture gives women few alternatives to the suffocation and sacrifice of traditional wifedom and motherhood. The inner frame is the family life of the Hills. She discovers from the example of her own mother that motherhood is "being buried alive, walled away from her own life, brick by brick." Her mother makes her feel guilty for "shattering her mother's emerging self" (*Meridian* 51). Her girlhood and young adulthood are the periods of emotional impoverishment.

Meridian's process of initiation into this new responsibility of motherhood, her pregnancy came as a total shock. She knew she did not want the child. After the birth of her son, he did not feel like anything to her but "a ball and chain". Tending to the needs of the child was slavery. She craved for freedom and felt as though something perched inside her brain was about to fly. She did not want to raise her child in a society "where children are not particularly valued" (*Meridian* 174). Walker suggests that it is not easy for Meridian to break the outer frame and to free herself from the mythic image of motherhood which culture and society has imposed upon her. The chapter "Battle Fatigue" analyses Meridian's confrontation with her mother and her inner conflict. Seventeen-year-old Meridian, a deserted wife and a mother, becomes aware of the past and present of the larger world in 1960. She decides to give away her child to better her life at Saxon College and also to save the life of her child. Meridian's perpetual confrontation with a debased self-image because she could not live up to the standard of motherhood results in her illness and the "spiritual degeneration". She waits healing so that she can study at Saxon and participate in the Civil Rights Movement. Meridian gets rid of her illness, her recurring dream of death and her own feelings of inadequacy and "primeval guilt". She is reconciled with her mother in a dream and whispers: "Mama, I love you. Let me go" (*Meridian* 125). Miss Winter, who treats Meridian as if she were her own child, forgives her. She makes it possible for her to encounter the hostile world with renewed vigour. Although marriage and motherhood are negative experiences for Meridian, a bondage, she attempts to transform herself. Meridian's journey precipitated by the dream of her mother, takes her back in time and space, as she prepares to move forward in consciousness. When she renounces her child and leaves the small Mississippi town to attend college in Atlanta, Meridian Hill begins the first journey toward wholeness, for selfhood.

Saxon College symbolizes white values that have crept into the thinking of middle class blacks. The college was a training ground for capitalists and for "ladies." Meridian, Anne Marion and other like-minded friends decide that they have two enemies:

“Saxon, which wanted them to become something- ladies- that was obsolete, and the larger, more deadly enemy, white racist society.” (*Meridian* 95)

Meridian despises capitalism and by her involvement in the Civil Rights Movement and the Atlanta Movement she wants to seek social justice, she wants black women to be accepted as equal. In the movement she meets a vain and pretentious activist and artist, Truman Held. While demonstrating against segregated facilities both Meridian

and Truman are arrested and beaten. During this struggle for their rights Meridian realizes that she loves Truman and that

“They were at a time and place in History that forced the trivial to fall away and they were absolutely together.” (*Meridian* 84)

But even such an experience of union with Truman is changed when she conceives his child and has an abortion because Truman becomes involved with a white exchange student, Lynne Rabinowitz. To Meridian it seemed

“doubly unfair that after all her sexual experience and after one baby and one abortion she had not once been completely fulfilled by sex.” (*Meridian* 115).

She feels that in order to retain her wholeness she must rise above bodily claims. Abortion and sterilization symbolize her anguish and frustration against Truman and male dominance. It is a metaphor for rooting out sexual weakness because Meridian wants to meet Truman at an equal level. It is a major event that pushes Meridian forward to act on her own. In fact, Meridian's "pilgrimage" cannot be completed until she transcends sexual, maternal and racial categories through her participation in the revolution. She is committed to recreate the world where black children may thrive without thorns of guilt.

Walker focuses on the complex relationship of Meridian, Truman and Lynne. She analyzes how sexism and racism work to influence black woman-black man-white woman relationships. Truman marries Lynne because he wants a woman, who is perfect in the eyes of the world, an ideal woman. The white woman is the closest thing to power he can get in white America. The other black revolutionaries, like Tommy Odds, view Lynne as a white "bitch" and Truman suffers under the "pressure of Ostracism from the group". He muses whether Lynne is guilty of "whiteness" or he is guilty of marrying a white bitch. Truman finally returns to Meridian three years after he married Lynne and confesses that loving Meridian makes him feel healthy and purposeful. Meridian's love for Truman is purged. It was not sexual, "It was forgiveness" (*Meridian* 173). Lynne gives him back to Meridian and returns to South.

The author takes a visionary leap in the final section of the novel. Meridian stands a witness to the common lot, a survivor of the movement. She, had not wanted to kill people in the movement. She is converted to a new approach to revolution. She has reached a point in her life where she is no longer evasive. Listening to the old



music, she is moved by the beauty of the black church. Her contribution to the revolution will be her "memory songs." For 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.” (*Meridian* 201)

In order to transform their society black people must understand their own heritage and reform themselves. It is in the process of attempting social change through the movement Meridian discovers her personal path. This discovery itself is the core of the novel. Truman atones for hurting Lynne's feelings. When Truman asks Meridian if her love for him is changed, her response "No, I set you free ..." (*Meridian* 216) shows that she has released herself from the sexual bonds and she intends to pursue her own wholeness. Meridian's search for wholeness can be put as her attempt to articulate the totality of self and how that self is related to the world. It is a search for freedom, joy and contentment in being a woman, a search for self-love and a yearning for communal love. In keeping with the black literary tradition it is a search for escape from the body and liberation for the soul by discovering "the truth" in the darkness. Walker suggests that Meridian is "Free at last." Her ties are not with a man, a family or with a specific community. Motherhood for her includes not only rearing of children but nurturing life and its continuity. She sees her existence as inseparable from all black people and writes:

“there is water in the world for us  
brought by our friends though the rock of mother and god  
Vanishes into sand  
and we, cast out alone to heal  
and re-create  
ourselves” (*Meridian* 213)

Unlike Nella Larsen's Helga Crane in *Quicksand* whose anguish is existential because she is bound first by race and then by sex, Meridian embraces her black heritage, her woman's heritage and reaches out to her people. She is a liberated black woman who knows what she should take from the past to create a new future. Truman knows that in her "pilgrimage" Meridian would return to the world cleansed of sickness. He would never see the old Meridian. "The new part had grown out of the old" (*Meridian* 219). Thus, Meridian's incorporation into the community is a new birth into spiritual whole, salvation from sufferings.

Walker's interest in communal continuity is an alternative to spiritual transcendence. Meridian decides that, in the absence of spiritual value, existence itself should be revered above 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.

“To her the only reason for self-sacrifice should be, as in the case of Grange, the preserving of another life . . . she understood, finally, that the respect she owed her life was to continue.”  
(*Possessing* 151)

The murder of the Civil Rights worker whose memorial she attends is essentially a killing of herself, and Meridian finds herself "approaching the concept of retaliatory murder" as recognition of the need to preserve "the best that has been produced." It is during the memorial ceremony that Meridian discovers the notion of preserving ancestral spirits as an extension of her duty to One Life. The commemorative statement of the surviving parent of the slain worker provides for existential clarity and economy: "My son died" (*Meridian* 202). The response of the community is different. In their ritual remembrance of the youth, they attempt to keep him "alive" by preserving in their memories. Meridian hears their promise with the martyr as an unspoken communal voice addressing the aggrieved parent:

“we are gathering ourselves to fight for and protect what your son fought for on behalf of us. If you will let us weave your story and your son's life and death into what we already know-into the songs, the sermons, the 'brother and sister'-we will soon be so angry we cannot help but move.... the church ... .., the music, the form of worship that has always sustained us, the kind of ritual you share with us, these are the ways to transformation that we know. We want to take this with us as far as we can.” (*Meridian* 204)

Walker specifies through the unvoiced voice that the community is aware of “Signifying” as one of the primary ways to transformation. She highlights the rhetorical nature of their attempt to keep the text of the worker alive. His "life and death," as texts, are woven into the songs, sermons, and forms of address (brother and sister) by which they identify themselves as a community. Walker underscores the significance of the process by describing another, more famous martyr being kept alive by the congregation:

“The minister-in his thirties, dressed in a neat black suit and striped tie of an earlier fashion-spoke in a voice so dramatically like that of Martin Luther King's that at first Meridian thought his intention was to dupe or to mock. She glanced about to see if anyone else showed signs of astonishment or derision.” (*Meridian* 199)

“Meridian is immediately suspicious about the minister's intention and looks for clues in the reactions of the others to see if mockery is really the message. The minister's youth and dress likewise semiotically "Signify" on Martin Luther King; the text of King-youth, voice, dress, sermon-has been woven into the ritual as one of the

church's ways of transformation, to enable the church to keep the past breathing and to arrange for the future.”(Smith 440)

“It struck Meridian that he was deliberately imitating King, that he and all of his congregation knew he was consciously keeping that voice alive. It was like a play. This startled Meridian; and the preacher's voice-not his own voice at all, but rather the voice of millions who could no longer speak-wound on and on....” (*Meridian* 200)

The preacher's voice is not his own voice at all because it is a text woven of many other texts, Meridian's unearthing that the preacher's voice is a compendium of ancestral voices makes clear to her that the perpetuation of the "Signifying chain" of ancestral voices is the chief responsibility she owes to One Life: The "circle is unbroken" as long as someone remains alive to speak the texts. Thus the "saving" of lives is central to Alice Walker's art.

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