

Beyond the Text: New Historicist Echoes and Discourse on Meridian by Alice Walker

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Abstract

This research paper examines Alice Walker's novel *Meridian* through the lens of New Historicism. It explores on how the novel reflects the social and political context of the Civil Rights movement and the second wave feminism in the United States during 1960s and 70s. This analysis focuses on how Walker portrays the triumphs and struggles of the movement particularly on the racial inequality and gender issues. It also examines how the character of *Meridian* is shaped after the second wave feminism. Furthermore, it emphasis on power dynamics and marginalized voices. It analyses how Walker challenges dominant narratives about race, gender, and class within the Civil Rights movement by giving voice to the marginalized characters. It also critiques on the media portrayals of the movement through Walker's narratives. It examines how historical figures, events, music, and literature of the era influenced Walker's writing.

Keywords: discourse, race, gender, resistance, feminism.

Alice Walker is a literary giant and a social activist. Born in rural Georgia, she rose above racial and economic barriers. Her novels stand as a powerful testament to the complexities of the civil rights movement. It is set against the backdrop of the 1960s, the story follows *Meridian*, a young black woman who becomes radicalized by the injustices. *Meridian* is her second novel that transcends the narrative of the Civil Rights Movement. It emerges as a rich tapestry woven from the social, political, and cultural discourses of that era. She illuminates the experiences faced by black womanhood during the struggle for racial equality.

New Historicism posits that literature is not merely a reflection of history but an active participant in its construction. It Challenged previous critical approaches, such as formalism and deconstruction, which focused primarily on the internal structures and the meanings of a text. New Historicists, on the other hand, argue that literature is deeply embedded in its historical context and cannot be fully understood without considering the social, political, and cultural forces that shaped its creation. Althusser's Marxist ideology, Foucault's discourse and the central concept is deconstructive criticism. H. Aram Vesser says, "New Historicists combat empty formalism by pulling historical considerations to the central stage of literary analysis." New historicism emerged as a response to formalism's limitations. Formalism focuses on the structure and form of the text which ignores the historical context in which the text was written and new historicism emphasizes the importance of considering the social, political, cultural,

and intellectual forces that shapes the author and influences the creation of the work. New Historicism as Louis Montrose says deals with “textuality of history and the history of texts” which help us understand that the past is shaped by how its written, historians choose what to include and how to frame which refers to the textuality of history whereas every written piece reflects the social, political, and cultural environment in which it was created and interpreted which is the historicity of text. New historicism emphasizes on the connection between the text and the historical context which is somewhere equal to Poststructuralism as it questions the idea of fixed meanings and grand narratives. Both these ideas reject the notion of a single, unchanging human nature that everyone shares. They believe that it is complex to identify with the present but with various factors like culture, history and society. In New historicism the text is identified with the historical context in which the text is written upon or the historical background of the author. Here, In Meridian the focus of the Civil Rights Movement with Walker’s experience is captured.

The Civil Rights Movement was a long fight for racial equality, particularly for black Americans. Through a series of protests, marches, and legal challenges, it aimed to dismantle segregation and discrimination. Leaders like Martin Luther King Jr. advocated for non-violent resistance as he has uttered a famous quote “Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter,” he advocated for the freedom of the blacks. Many of the works in literature explore the concept of human rights, yet they also expose how these rights are violated. This is especially true in African American literature, where the character's race determines the rights, they have or lack. Even with the Civil Rights Movement, the reality for many African Americans falls short of the promise of equality. This paper examines how human rights violations faced by African Americans through Alice Walker’s novel Meridian with its protagonist Meridian Hill who at times represents the writer, Alice Walker. Walker’s own experience in the movement had emerged through her writing on womanist view of the Civil Rights Movement of America.

In Meridian, Walker tackles the complexities of the Civil Rights Movement through the eyes of Meridian Hill, a young black woman. It follows Meridian’s journey as she’s awakened by racial injustice and joins the fight for equality. It is a meditation on the movement’s impact, exploring its legacy of empowerment and the fight for justice. In the beginning Meridian was unaware of what is happening around, she then understands these distinctions between the whites and the blacks and the place that she lived in. She was aware of this only after witnessing this violent act of bombing.

“During the night _between three and four A.M. The house was demolished by firebombs. The bombs, exploding, set fire to _not just the house _the whole cluster of houses on that street... It seems they had posted a guard who was alerted by the sound of a pickup truck stopping several yards from the house and then, in a few minutes racing off. This struck her, that they had had a guard. Why did they need a guard? Then, a question more to the point: How had they known they would need a guard? Did they know something she did not know? She had lived in this town all her life, but could not have foreseen that the house would be bombed. Perhaps because nothing like this had ever happened before. Not in this town. Or had it? She recalled that the night before she dreamed of Indians. She had thought she had forgotten about them. And so it

was that one day in the middle of April in 1960 Meridian Hill became aware of the past and present of the larger world” (Meridian 70)

She understood the world only after this violent incident and this serves as a catalyst for her participation in the movement. She understood the prevailing racial inequality. A month after this terrible incident she moves forward to join the movement, “A month after the bombing meridian walked through the gate of a house and knocked on the door, ‘I’ve come to volunteer’ she said to the dark young man staring at her” (Meridian 77). The role of women especially Meridian was to educate the illiterate blacks who were sympathetic to the movement “The majority of the black townspeople were sympathetic to the Movement from the first, and told Meridian she was doing a good thing: typing, teaching illiterates to read and write demonstrating against segregated facilities and keeping the movement house open when the other workers returned to school” (Meridian 82)

Truman was a part of the Atlanta Movement which is also part of the Civil Rights Movement. The historical context is very important to understand the background of the novel. The second wave of feminism is also a background study for this as it advocated for equality and raised voices against discrimination. In the 1960s and 70s after the influence of the Civil Rights Movement, women started advocating for equality. Germaine Greer, an Australian feminist in *The Whole Woman* talks about the second wave feminism as “women’s liberation did not see the female’s potential in terms of the male’s actual; the visionary feminists of the late sixties and early seventies knew that women could never find freedom by agreeing to live the lives of unfree men.” She says that women’s liberation shouldn’t be about simply mirroring men’s lives. True freedom according to visionary feminists, lies in creating a path beyond equality. rather than replicating potentially restrictive male roles, women should define their own values and forge their own destinies.

Walker embodies this concept of women's liberation beyond just equality, as Meridian asserted herself better in identifying herself strongly. She likely seeks not just racial equality but also a space where she can define her own agency and fight for justice. Meridian rejects the traditional motherhood which usually a woman enjoys, she abandons her own son by rejecting the traditional motherhood and asserts herself advocating equality and she prioritises her own growth. She was aware of this while she was thinking what Delores Jones had said was not true.

“If her mother had had children in slavery she would not, automatically, have been allowed to keep them, because they would not have belonged to her but to the white person who ‘owned’ them all. Meridian knew that enslaved women had been made miserable by the sale of their children, that they had laid their lives, gladly, for their children, that the daughters of these enslaved women had though their greatest blessing from ‘freedom’ was that it meant they could keep their own children. And what had Meridian Hill done with her precious child? She had given him away. She thought of her mother as being worthy of this maternal history, and of herself as belonging to an unworthy minority, for which there was no precedent and of which she was, as far as she knew, the only member” (Meridian 90)

She rejects motherhood and prioritises herself rather than living for her child. She left her child and is reminded of it only when she is thinking about slavery and the motherhood of African Americans. She also tries to break the hierarchical structures in the black American Movement. This movement, while fighting for equality, has its own limitations on women's agency. Meridian feels the need for a more active, even radical, form of resistance that isn't dictated by a male-dominated hierarchy. When she volunteered for the movement, she was in trouble with men around, "The other two men laughed at him: 'It even rhymes!' they said. But Meridian was puzzled. Perhaps they were laughing at her, too, because she had not understood what had been said. She told them her name, they grunted and then turned away, except for Swinburn" (Meridian 79) this troubled her initially and then the rejection of Truman, She actually loved his blackness rather than hers, "Meridian though disliking herself for it, thought him handsome for exactly those reasons too" (Meridian 99) Truman was patriarchal which is reflected in his relation with Lynne "Truman had felt hemmed in and pressed down by Lynne's intelligence" (Meridian 148) She rejected her for the same reason at the end. However confused Meridian was, she became strong at the end, "He was stunned to learn that she had long ago dismissed him" (Meridian 149) Meridian finds herself bold and strong and she didn't want to be oppressed again is evident since the beginning of the novel that narrated the present "I don't need one. I am getting much better by myself..." (Meridian 13). She also says, "I am strong, actually, said Meridian, cockily, for someone who looked near death and had to do exercises before her body allowed her to crawl or stand. I am just not superwoman" (Meridian 20) She asserted herself rather than expecting any men in life which was the act of second-wave feminism to assert oneself rather than to depend on other men.

Walker's Meridian is richly understood through both the Civil Rights Movement and second-wave feminism making this a prime focus for the new historicist study. Meridian's experiences are shaped by historical forces of racial oppression and the fight for women's liberation. This study just traces the history behind the novel Meridian rather than reading it was a story but as a reflection of a specific cultural and political movement. It further highlights the complex interplay between literature and the historical forces that shape the text.

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