

Human Rights and Dignity: A Quest – Study of Walker’s Novel Meridian

Dr. T. T. Lasitha, Assistant Professor of English, Bharathidasan Govt. College for Women, (Autonomous)
Puducherry

Abstract: Afro-American literature claims special administrative and critical attention in the 20th century. The rise of the African American novel in the 19th century is both a social and a literary phenomenon important for understanding the boundaries the novelists have confronted and the ways in which these boundaries have been crossed. Alice Walker belonged to a society which censured individual expression for women. Inspired by Martin Luther King, she went back to Mississippi where she found fragmentation in her people and wrote the novel Meridian to conform her faith. This paper focuses on the journey of the title character, Meridian and her mother, Mrs Hill who being human fought for their rights in order to live a dignified life by overcoming all the oppressions and suppressions. Walker feels that the greatest value a person attains is humanity which is possible only for those who struggle to seek the wholeness towards the end.

Keywords: Alice Walker, Feminism, Feminist, Civil Right Movement, Women Empowerment, Economical Oppression, Social Suppression.

Feminism, in real sense, emerged long after women started questioning their inferior status and demanding amelioration in their social position. During the 1960s and 1970s, the term ‘Feminism’ had a restricted use in relation to specific concern and specific groups. Feminism is now a much established field wherein it cannot claim women as its domain. It is considered as the most radical goal, both personal as well as collective, which is got to be realized, a world which is a better place not just for some women, but for all women. During this period much of feminism and feminist theory represented, were concerned with problems faced by Western, white, middle-class women while at the same time, claiming the rise of feminism as a movement on with the idea that the portrayal of woman by male artists must be deficient for; even the most imaginative of male writers are by no means equipped to give an authentic rendering of the female sensibility. Women have always been the subject of literary work but literature has mostly been created by men. Women writers of all ages have a natural preference for writing about women characters. Feminist activists emerged from diverse communities and feminist theorists began to focus on the intersection between gender and sexuality with other social identities, such as race and class. Many feminists today argue that feminism, as a grass-root movement, seeks to cross boundaries based on social class, race, culture and religion. It is culturally specific and addresses issues relevant to the women in a given society to represent women in general.

The concept of human right is continually evolving and as being used in divorce ways, human rights can encompass the many forms of ‘rights-talk’ that social movements use to make their claims; it is now commonplace to declare that we live in an age of human rights. Feminism demands the acceptance of women’s right to individual conscience and judgment. It postulates that women’s essential worth stems from the common humanity and does not demand on the other relationships of her life. Women have been suppressed for ages and they were being dominated by man. This ideology must have emerged from the Bible which says that woman was made from man and hence is subordinate:

“So the Lord God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping; He took one of the man’s ribs and closed up the place with flesh. Then the Lord God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man”. [Gen.2:21,22]

The feminist movement in fact, began with a discussion of power, powerlessness and the women’s right of power on her life. It was from the courage and the tenacity of the Afro-American Women and from the platforms of the Anti-Slavery Society that the white pioneers of the American Women’s Rights Movement drew their original inspiration and political education. Afro-American literature claims special administrative and critical attention in the twentieth century. The rise of the African American novel in the nineteenth century is both a social and a literary phenomenon important for understanding the boundaries that novelists have confronted and the ways in which these boundaries have been crossed.

Since the early twentieth century, the African American novel has paid frequent attention to themes of migration, racial confrontation and adjustment, and the struggle for human, civil and equal rights. During the sixties there was a perceptible change in the attitude of writers on account of the cultural renaissance. For a long time, many blacks deliberately attempted to forget their painful past or leave it to the deliberations of the white writers. African-American literary tradition took a new direction after the cultural upheaval. Writers started making conscious attempts to go to the roots and relink the present with the past.

The blacks faced hard facts and cruel reality of racism right from the days of slavery due to their colour and physiognomy were terrible handicaps. Judged by the whites’ standards of life behaviour and beauty, their life became unbearable. Universal codes of social and psychological praxis as laid down by the dominant white culture were forcibly thrust upon them. The African American race was ghettoized, persecuted and viciously outlawed from all avenues of decency, hope, progress and livelihood.

Alice Walker grounds her fiction and poetry primarily in the experiences of the south and southern blacks. Her three volumes of poetry, three novels and two collections of stories depend upon what black life is, has been and can be in a specified landscape that becomes an emblematic of American life. In her novels one can see the search for survival or rather the protagonist reaching the shore by surviving against the odds in their lives. Walker takes seemingly ragged edges and arranges them into works of functional through terrifying beauty. Her novels continuously stitch a fabric of the everyday violence that is committed against her characters and that they commit upon one another in their search for regeneration and regeneration is what they as black people desire.

Women empower themselves by acknowledging and accepting their equal worth as human beings. Education has empowered women and those in captive were set free through this. Women transcend empirical difficulties and hindrances and came out triumphant. Women enhance life and strengthen constructive life force through their clear thinking, decision-making and behaviour. Simone de Beauvoir observes: "The women of today are in a fair way to dethrone the myth of femininity; they are beginning to affirm their independence in concrete ways." (30)

Walker feels that the greatest value a person attains is full humanity which is possible only for those who struggle to seek the wholeness towards the end. Many characters of Walker are victims of social, sexual and economic oppression and they exist under certain degrading circumstances. They suffer passively under such a traumatic situation and later manage to transcend their desperate and painful circumstances in order to affirm life. The happiness for the poor or the oppressed or the black women can be imagined, pursued and achieved through the growing strength of black women.

Alice Walker's *Meridian*, published in the year 1976, deals with the life of a college-educated woman who commits herself to aid the southern blacks in their struggle for political and social equality. She joins an organization of black revolution but is forced to leave the group when she refuses to condone its violent actions. However, she continues her activist work and later becomes a legendary heroine. *Meridian's* mother marries Mr. Hill, not out of love, but to appease the community. After marrying him and begetting children she realises that she has lost her freedom, and feels entrapped. She feels the same about other women also and that she is not able to do anything independently of her choice. Hence, she is unable to go back to teaching.

Meridian is considered as an autobiographical work. The title character was born in the rural south, like Walker, and uses education as a means of escape. Pregnant and married to a high school dropout, she struggles with the intention of suicide or to kill her child, but eventually decides to put him in an orphanage and thinks of attending college. After graduating, she enters an organization of black Militants in Mississippi, but realizes that she is not willing to kill for the cause. With this knowledge she resolves to return to rural Mississippi to help its residents' struggle against oppression.

As a woman, she, through sacrifice and suffering, fulfilled her dreams of becoming a school teacher. *Meridian's* mother is truly great because she "had persisted in bringing them all" – the children, the husband, the family, the race. Along with life, then, the children receive from their ancestors a heritage of sacrifice and suffering, a heritage that they feel they cannot always maintain.

In *Meridian* there is an impassioned account of the spiritual progress of a young woman. She is the most interesting character. She brings out a successful change from being a victim to a fully responsible person. She has ceased to be a committed person and becomes entirely a different character. She is a heroine who has not fully broken the gravitational field of the sixties; she also feels the fetters of the disbanded revolutionary movement, as most do not.

Meridian "evolves from a woman trapped by racial and sexual oppression to revolutionary figure, effecting action and strategy to bring freedom to herself and other poor disenfranchised Blacks in the south. The teenaged *Meridian* is forced into an unfulfilling marriage. She becomes pregnant; she reluctantly marries Eddie, the father of her child, and makes an effort at being a "proper" wife and mother. Finding the role confining and intolerable, she harbours thoughts of killing her child, and then she contemplates on suicide rather than harming her own baby. Finally her marriage ends and she gives away her child believing she is saving both the lives. From this point, her spirit is broken; she begins a sort of physical degeneration. She loses her hair, dons a cap and dungarees, lives alone in a small room in southern town trying to find her own health while she helps the Black people in these towns to find power.

Meridian's journey from the most ordinary position as a high school dropout to a self-illuminated person is the journey of a woman of empowerment in order to attain selfhood and longingness to fulfil the mission of one's own life. To begin as an ordinary black female and end as a self-assured person was not an easy development. *Meridian* must decide whether she will, for the cause, commit the ultimate violence of killing. She considers this as the ultimate violence against herself as well as on others. The fruitfulness of *Meridian's* choice of inaction and silence may be revealed in the growing back of her hair in her rejuvenation and re feminization.

Meridian, in order to stand up to her own needs takes first step towards becoming a revolutionary petunia, she stops to live by other standards and learns to bloom for herself in order to survive, since her

rebellious act alienates her from the society. The result of working for Civil Rights Movements makes her guilty as she had abandoned her child. However, she conforms to the tradition by suppressing her emotion. She has so much of potential in her which is revealed in the later stages. Barbara Christine writes that the main struggle in Meridian is the fight between a natural life-driven spirit and society's deadly structures:

Though the concept of one life motivates Meridian in her quest toward physical and spiritual health, the societal evils that subordinate one class to another, one race to another, one sex to another, fragment and ultimately threaten life. The novel Meridian... is built on the tension between the African concept of animism, "that spirit the inhabits all life", and the societal forces that inhibit the growth of the living towards their natural state of freedom. (91)

Meridian's troubled feelings about her mother revolve around the conflict between the need to love her mother and the need to be different from her. In Meridian, martyrdom is more psychological. The civil rights movement was deteriorating while American feminism was rising and had strong effect on Afro-American literature. Black women writers seemed to find their voices and audience, whereas black men seemed to love theirs. Black women's concern had earlier belonged to what was considered the private rather than public, as if the kitchen range could not adequately represent the struggle. But it turned out that the concerns of the kitchen were big enough to encompass the love of struggle and survival.

Meridian relates the attitude of the spiritual and political principles of the Civil Rights movement as opposed to the violence, the destruction of life, even as it had violence inflicted upon its members by ruling classes. At one stage she feels guilty about giving her son to other and aborting her second pregnancy. Having sinned against the biological motherhood, she becomes a mother by 'expanding her mind with action' directed towards the preservation of all life.

Meridian affirms and challenges the underlying concepts of the movements of sixties. As a black woman and as a black mother, she struggles to be free within herself even as she encounters sexism, elitism, violence within the movement. Robert Towers observes that: "though beset by serious structural problems and other lapses of crafts, Meridian remains the most impressive fictional treatment of the movement." (CLC 450) Meridian's communities' wholeness and the swoon of ecstasy are her political paradigms. As an intellectual and a political activist she understands that the individual's inspiration for social change can only be realized through the group's collective activity. Her greatest radicalization is to overcome social and sexual categories by all women especially by the black women. Meridian's struggle is within and against heterosexual relationship.

Meridian Hill leaves the men in her life to search for fulfilment as a human being. On the other hand Meridian's mother frustrated by her roles as a mother has never learned to be in any other way creative in her home, though creativity was in her home, it was a refused expression that she was not able to show her anger against those who oppressed her. Meridian Hill, like her creator, is thrust into the heart of the Civil Rights Movement after she receives a scholarship to a black women's college in Atlanta.

As a mother (Meridian's mother), she is deprived from self-fulfilment and self-realization, and more over tries to regiment Meridian into the role of a mother. She never instructs her daughter, Meridian to benefit from the knowledge that she had gained from the past:

She learned to make paper flowers and prayer pillows from tiny scraps of cloth, because she needed to feel something in her hands. She never learned to cook well, she never learned to braid hair prettily or to be in any other way creative in her home. She could have done so, if she had wanted to. Creativity was in her, but it was refused expression. It was all deliberate. A war against those to whom she could not express her anger or shout, "It's not fair! (Meridian, 54)

She is very much a part of the racial oppression and discrimination. She is morally outraged at her daughters' decision to "abandon" her child; she exemplifies the plight of black mothers, "buried alive", walled away from her own life, "brick by brick" with the birth of each successive child. Both Meridian and her mother were able to challenge, neutralize and modify the social imperatives that restricted their accomplishments and mobility in the society. Their actions flow from belief to the extent that they empower their conviction about themselves and hence others become ultimately responsive and supportive of their new autonomy. As they strengthen their identity and dignity, they were able to shoulder all kinds of responsibilities and no longer feel obligated as was done by their erstwhile generations. As they identify their own values and rights more clearly and consistently, they no longer allow themselves to be victimized by circumstances.

These women believe that they exit in their own ways and that they have a responsibility to live their life fully and with dignity that encourages them from within and gives them the strength necessary for their survival. Thus, they change themselves from the passivity to an active form that is from limited perspective to a broader horizon. Women transcend empirical difficulties and hindrances and came out triumphant.

References

Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. London: Picador Classics, 1988.

Bryfonski, Dedria and Phyllis Carmel Mendelson. *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Detroit, Michigan. Vol. 46, 1978, p450.

Christian, Barbara. *Black Women Novelist: The Development of a Tradition, 1892-1976*. London: Greenwood Press.

The Bible. New Millennium Publication, 1999.

Walker, Alice. *Meridian*. New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1976.