

TRIBHUVAN UNIVERSITY

Awakening of African American consciousness in Alice Walker's *Meridian*

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**Central Department of English****Letter of Recommendation**

Mr. Uday Raj Adhikari has completed his thesis entitled “The Awakening of Meridian Hill in Alice Walker’s *Meridian*” under my supervision. He carried out his research from 27<sup>th</sup>, October 2010 A.D. to 30<sup>th</sup>, January 2011 A.D. I hereby recommend his thesis be submitted for Viva Voce.

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**Letter of Approval**

This thesis entitled **The Awakening of Meridian Hill in Alice Walker's *Meridian*** by Uday Raj Adhikari has been submitted to the Central Department of English, Tribhuvan University. It has been approved by the undersigned members of the Research Committee.

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### **Abstract**

The present research focuses on Meridian Hill's struggle against patriarchal domination and exploitation by the dominant white class. In the beginning of the novel, Meridian is portrayed by Walker as a poor, uneducated, black girl. Without knowing the meaning of sex, she is sexually abused and mistakenly gets pregnant. While in college, she has to hide the fact that she is a mother from her fellow students. But gradually she takes all the difficulties in her stride and struggles on with life. Then the Civil Rights Movement acts as a catalyst in her life. By actively participating in the movement, she gains confidence and agency. She is emboldened to fight for her cause and help fellow blacks who are in need and trouble. Later she becomes a member of voter registering committee. All these events combine to transform Meridian from a demure and crestfallen girl to a highly awakened woman, who becomes strong and determined.

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### **Introduction to Alice Walker and Meridian**

Walker's writing has been a major factor to naming and defining African American women's thought for African American women as well as for non-African American feminist scholars. She coined the term "womanism" in 1983, which would define African American feminism for a large number of African American women who had been trying to define themselves within and without the white dominated feminist movement. This term continues to be used to describe current feminist thought by women of African descent and it is applied to the historical understanding of Black women's writings, theories and history.

Walker's strength as a writer lies in her ability to write about topics that are generally taboo, to construct characters, themes and plots that are often untouchable for mainstream writers and audiences, and to continue to raise topics whose popularity fizzles while the issues continue. She has consistently received criticism for her woman centered writing, often accused of being anti-male. While Walker's work proves that it is not anti-male, but is pro-female, she is clear about the oppressive relationships between women and men in this society, and in African and African American communities. She writes of the oppressions of women, without being reluctant to name their oppressors. Despite the negative criticism, Walker continues to write from the perspectives of the oppressed. She also points out the impact of oppressions on all members of societies which are constructed through oppressive practices.

In *Meridian*, Walker has written a novel that accomplishes a remarkable amount as the issues she is concerned with are massive. Events are strung over twenty five years, although most occur between the height of the civil rights movement and

the present. Through *Meridian*, Walker establishes a reputation as a writer of solid, well-crafted fictions that focused upon women who withstood the crushing evils of racism and sexism, who by their very survival achieved a triumph of the spirit.

Written against the backdrop of the Civil Rights Movement, Walker's *Meridian* explores African American's women's identity vis-a-vis the political resistance of European cultural domination. The novel is about the personal struggle to overcome the patriarchal society. We can see the complete transformation of Meridian from a poor, uneducated black girl to an independent woman having her own identity. Thus, the novel is a subtle representation of a tormented, subordinated, dominated and self conflicting woman's psychology and frustration, isolation and rebellion that culminate in terrible action like revolt or death. It demonstrates a woman's self realization and establishment of self-identity.

Walker's *Meridian* deals with the relationship between Meridian's struggle in the Civil Rights Movement, to change the conditions of black people's life, and her own development, as a repressed individual who is transformed through her personal struggle and the Civil Rights work. Because the Civil Rights Movement brought black and white young people together as equals, though they had been raised in a racist, segregated society, new possibilities for interracial friendship, love and conflict were created in life and in fiction. Walker explores the complexities of sex and race and racism in the triangular relationship of Meridian, Truman and Lynne, and the possibility of friendship between black and white women in Meridian and Lynne's relationship.

From the beginning of her writing life, Walker has seen her role as voice for the voiceless. Alice Malsenior Walker is born in Eatonton, Georgia, to Willie Lee and Minnie Tallulah (Grant) Walker. Like many of her fictional characters, she is the



daughter of a sharecropper and the youngest of eight children. At age eight, Walker was accidentally injured by a BB gun shot to her eye by her brother. Her partial blindness caused her to withdraw from normal childhood activities and begin writing poetry to ease her loneliness. She found that writing demanded peace and quiet, but these were difficult things to come by when ten people lived in four rooms. She spent a great deal of time working outdoors sitting under a tree.

Walker attended segregated schools, yet she recalled that she had terrific teachers who encouraged her to believe the world she was reaching for actually existed. Although Walker grew up in a poor environment, she was supported by her community and by the knowledge that she could choose her own identity. Moreover, she insisted that her mother granted her permission to be a writer and gave her the social, spiritual, and moral substance for her stories. Upon graduating from high school, Walker got involved in the growing Civil Rights movement, a movement which called for equal rights among all races. After graduation she worked with a voter registration drive in Georgia and the Head Start program in Jackson, Mississippi.

Over the more than three decades of her writing life, Walker has immersed herself in protest, civil disobedience, writing, speaking, traveling, and film making on behalf of numerous causes. The civil rights movement of the 1960s involved her in demonstrations, the voter registration campaign, and defiance of Mississippi's anti-miscegenation laws. The 1970s saw her entry into the feminist movement as a regular contributor to *Ms. Magazine* and a friendship with Gloria Steinem.

The 1980s brought international attention with her Pulitzer Prize for *The Color Purple* and Steven Spielberg's adaptation of the book to film. During this decade Walker defined, and in some ways invented, womanist awareness and the

womanist movement. In the 1990s she stood firmly against the Gulf War, visited Cuba and promoted a conciliatory view of Castro, mounted a campaign against female circumcision. All of these causes have figured in her poetry, fiction, and nonfiction.

### **Literary Output of Alice Walker**

Although she is much better known as a prose writer, Alice Walker began her professional career as a poet, and has continued, though less prolifically, to publish volumes of verse. But it is through her prose, both fiction and nonfiction, that Walker has found her larger audience and has more fully established the subject matter and premises of her work. Her central character is the black woman, who throughout history and throughout the world has endured oppression and exploitation at the hands of whites of both sexes and men of all races, who has nurtured and survived, giving love but not always receiving it in return.

Her work is heavily rooted in the oral tradition, in the passing on of stories from generation to generation in the language of the people. There is virtually unanimous consent, that Walker is a writer of great gifts, which, with undeniable sincerity and intensity, she places wholly at the service of those themes that are to her the most important issues in the range of human experience. Much of Walker's work describes the emotional, spiritual, and physical devastation that occurs when family trust is betrayed.

Her focus is on African American women who live in a larger world and struggle to achieve independent identities beyond male domination. Although her characters are strong, they are, nevertheless, vulnerable. Their strength resides in their acknowledged debt to their mothers, to their sensuality, and to their friendships among women. These strengths are celebrated in Walker's work, along with the

problems women encounter in their relationships with men who regard them as less significant than themselves merely because they are women. Her stories focus not so much on the racial violence that occurs among strangers but the violence among friends and family members, a kind of deliberate cruelty, unexpected but always predictable.

Walker began her exploration of the terrors that beset African American women's lives in her first collection of short stories, *In Love and Trouble*. Here she examines the stereotypes about their lives that misshape them and misguide perceptions about them. Her second short story collection, *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down*, dramatizes the strength of African American women to rebound despite racial, sexual, and economic difficulties. Walker's first novel, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, centers on the life of a young African American girl, Ruth Copeland, and her grandfather, Grange. As an old man, Grange learns that he is free to love, but love does not come without painful responsibility. At the climax of the novel, Grange summons his newly found knowledge to rescue his granddaughter, Ruth, from his brutal son, Brownfield. The rescue demands that Grange murder his son in order to stop the cycle of cruelty.

Walker's third and most famous novel, *The Color Purple*, is about Celie, a woman so down and out that she can only tell God her troubles, which she does in the form of letters. Poor, black, female, alone and uneducated, held down by class and gender, Celie learns to lift herself up from sexual exploitation and brutality with the help of the love of another woman, Shug Avery. Against the backdrop of Celie's letters is another story about African customs. This evolves from her sister Nettie's letters which Celie's husband hid from Celie over the course of twenty years. Here, Walker presented problems of women bound within an African context, encountering

many of the same problems that Celie faces. Both Celie and Nettie are restored to one another, and, most important, each is restored to herself.

Her participation in the Civil Rights Movement was central to Walker's life not only as a young woman but also as a young writer. She has written about the Movement in some of her early poems, in short stories, in essays, and briefly in her first novel, but *Meridian* is her novel of the Civil Rights Movement. Walker is the only major African American woman writer who came of age during the Civil Rights Movement and participated in it and the only one to write a novel about the Civil Rights Movement.

Meridian Hill is a young woman at an Atlanta college attempting to find her place in the revolution for racial and social equality. She discovers the limits beyond which she will not go for the cause, but despite her decision not to follow the path of some of her peers, she makes significant sacrifices in order to further her beliefs. Working in a campaign to register African American voters, Meridian cares broadly and deeply for the people she visits, and, while her coworkers quit and move to comfortable homes, she continues to work in the deep South despite a paralyzing illness. Meridian's nonviolent methods, though seemingly less radical than the methods of others, prove to be an effective means of furthering her beliefs.

Meridian is set in the American South during the 1960s and early '70s. The heroine, Meridian, is a black woman from a southern town. She marries, has a child, gets a divorce, sends her child away, and ends up working in a voters' registration campaign, encouraging African-Americans to register. Meridian is different from her co-workers in that she interacts with people as individuals, rather than by stereotyping them. For example, while others lecture black families about the importance of voting, Meridian sits and talks with them, trying to address their basic needs of food,

heat, and affection.

As years pass, her co-workers quit and move into comfortable houses. She moves deeper south, living in whatever housing the community can afford to give in exchange for her constant work on their behalf. Frequently, after staging a rally or other event, Meridian develops partial paralysis. She grows more and more ill. A halo-like light surrounds her head as she thinks of the history of her people and of her role in that history. She ultimately heals herself and moves to the next small town.

The themes of Walker are generally revolutionary and confront the contemporary experiences of black Americans, particularly those of black American women and their cultural, social and political history. Her works like *Meridian* began to elicit a host of criticisms. Most of the criticisms deal with existential crisis, psychological turmoil and deferred self in *Meridian*. In *Melus*, Donna Krolik Hollenberg has said about *Meridian* that it is:

The story of a young black women's struggle to find herself in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. Although its primary subject is the legacy of black women in sexist, racist America, the novel also tests the limits of cross racial relationships between two minority groups, Blacks and Jews. (31)

He points out that Meridian's struggle for personal growth is an alternative to the political movement of the 1960s. Walker herself was involved in Civil Rights Movement to show her place through Meridian in the novel. As Karen Stein writes about *Meridian* pointing out that:

The novel points out that the Civil Rights Movement often reflected the oppressiveness of patriarchal capitalism. Activists merely turned political meteoric to their own ends while continuing to repress

spontaneous individuality. To overcome this destructiveness, Walker reaches for a new definition of revolution. Her hope for a just society inheres not merely in political change, but in political change, but in personal transformation. (130)

Walker tries to depict the realities and hardships of black women. Her purpose is to foreground the dreams and failures of those people who have been dominated and pushed at the margin. Lynn Pifer writes in *African-American Review* that:

Meridian's own mother, for instance, is an unhappy mother who manages to conform to the tradition only by suppressing her own emotions. She feels that she has been betrayed by other mothers. Meridian's girlhood friend Nelda is another victim: Nelda wanted to go to college, but since she became a mother at age fourteen, she never finished high school. Fast Mary's pregnancy ends to her suicide, and the heavy belly of her pregnant Wild Child limits her ability to move out of the path of the car that kills her. (34)

He further sees Meridian as, "Full of victims of this tradition of Black Motherhood" (36). Meridian herself belongs to the worthless minority of mothers excluded by the tradition. Her own sacrifice of giving up her child is as painful and trying as any of the legendary sacrifices, but according to the code of the tradition, Meridian's trying is not a sacrifice but a case of willful neglect. Susan Danielson sees suppressed and dominated predicament of Meridian and her family and comments that:

Meridian's family suffers from the racism and sexism that affects the larger community. The family's land is expropriated by the white community for a segregated park. Her parents lose their jobs as

teachers when a desegregation order is enforced. Meridian's awakening to the movement comes at a time when her life appears to be shaping itself into defeated mold from the past. At 16 she drops out of school to marry and have a baby, after her young husband, Eddy, leaves her, her days are spent in lethargy. (320)

He focuses his concerns towards male domination and how a black woman faces different problems even in her mid twenties. He sees Meridian as a victim of social circumstances and individual shortsightedness. He further says that, "*Meridian* tells the story of Meridian Hill, a young black woman whose deeply rooted relationship with her community gives way to a struggle to reconcile her own cultural values with the values of the Civil Rights Movement which has called her forth" (318).

Anyway black feminist critics have focused on Meridian's struggle as a journey from adolescence to maturity, emphasizing Meridian's personal development and salvation. One of the major issues in the novel is the fact that black women are often seen as little more than baby-making machine and Meridian tries break out of this stereotype by giving away her child and attending college. In this connection Barbara Christian writes:

Since, in the principle, society places motherhood on a pedestal, while in reality it rejects individual mothers as human beings with needs and desires, mothers must both love their role as they are penalized for it. As they praised for being mothers, they are also damned as baby machines that spew out their product indiscriminately upon society. (425)

She discusses the interdependence of individual and societal change in Walker's novel. Walker is a political writer who, like other black women writers, wants her works to affect something in the world. Lindsey Tucker comments saying, "Certainly a young black girl going of age in the south of the turbulent sixties and her involvement with Civil Rights Movement is the stuff of realism. But while politics and race are central concerns" (3). He focuses her struggle to change the society involved in the Civil Rights Movement. Several critics focus upon Meridian's personal growth involving in Civil Rights Movement. In this connection Roberta M. Hendrickson says:

*Meridian* is a novel of the Civil Rights Movement; Meridian is more than a novel about the Civil Rights Movement. Walker used her experience in the movement and the experience of others of her generation to deal with the social, political and philosophical issues raised by the Movement, issues that continue to engage us today. (25)

He focuses on the movement which reaffirmed African American's connection to each other as a group of people and their history of struggle against oppression. Although the critics agree to disagree about many aspects of this novel, the above mentioned criticism could not touch the real aspects of *Meridian*. So this thesis attempts to determine the awakening of Meridian Hill in Alice Walker's *Meridian*.



## **Chapter Two: New Historicism**

New Historicism is unified by its disdain for literary formalism. Specifically, leaders of the movement describe themselves as unhappy with the exclusion of social and political circumstances from the interpretation of literary works. They are impatient with the settled view that a poem is a self-contained object, a verbal icon, a logical core surrounded by a texture of irrelevance. The new movement has arisen at least as much in response to later developments as to a critical establishment which has made a formalistic view of literary works its official doctrine. Thus the New Historicism in literary study has emerged not so much in the spirit of counter-insurgency as after the manner of a corporate reorganization. It has been a response not to literature but to literary studies.

New Historicism is a theory applied to literature that suggests literature must be studied and interpreted within the context of both the history of the author and the history of the critic. The theory arose in the 1980s, and with Stephen Greenblatt as its main proponent became quite popular in the 1990s. Unlike previous historical criticism, New Historicism evaluates how the work is influenced by the time in which it is produced. It also examines the social sphere in which the author moved the psychological background of the author, the books and theories that may have influenced the author and any other factors which influenced the work of art.

The situation in English studies as the century entered its final two decades was one that placed a greater premium on method than ideas. In addition, there was a rising sense that literary study had reached something of an impasse. On one side were the students of the New Critics, still doing readings of long-accepted texts. On the other, the deconstructionists were showing how texts undo themselves. Both seemed remote from the true interests of the new professoriate which had cut its teeth

on the political slogans of the sixties. Younger critics were having to resort to a tandem operation, using deconstruction or some other variant of poststructuralist method to clear the ground on which an assortment of radical political notions were carted in to raise a new interpretation. But such a procedure left critics anxious lest their interpretations fail to go beyond the already familiar readings of the text.

It was in this situation that the New Historicism emerged. It appeared to offer a distinctive approach, along with the opportunity to salvage one's political commitments. Indeed, at times the New Historicism seemed almost designed to methodize the political interpretation of literature. New Historicism is a literary theory based on the idea that literature should be studied and interpreted within the context of both the history of the author and the history of the critic. It emerged in the 1970s and 1980s, largely in reaction to the lingering effects of New Criticism and its ahistorical approach. New Historicism's adjectival emphasis highlights its opposition to the old historical-biographical criticism prevalent before the advent of New Criticism.

In the earlier historical-biographical criticism, literature was seen as a reflection of the historical world in which it was produced. Further, history was viewed as stable, linear and recoverable. John Brannigan explains the difference between old history and new history as:

New historicist critics tend to define the discipline of history more broadly than did their predecessors. They view history as a social science like anthropology and sociology, whereas older historicists tended to view history as literature's background and the social sciences as being properly historical. They have erased the line dividing historical and literary materials. (52)

In contrast, New Historicism views history skeptically, but also more broadly.

History includes all of the cultural, social, political and anthropological discourses at work in any given age and these various texts are unranked. Rather than forming a backdrop, the many discourses at work at any given time affect both an author and their text, as both are inescapably part of a social construct. New Historicism acknowledges not only that a work of literature is influenced by its author's times and circumstances, but that the critic's response to that work is also influenced by his environment, beliefs and prejudices. Stephen Greenblatt was an early important figure and later Michel Foucault's inter-textual methods focusing especially on issues such as power and knowledge proved very influential.

New historicists remind us that it is treacherous to reconstruct the past as it really was. And they know that the job is impossible for those who are unaware of that difficulty, insensitive to the bent or bias of their own historical vantage point. Thus, when new historicist critics describe a historical change, they are highly conscious of the theory of historical change that informs their account. Therefore, the New Historicist understands literature to be rooted in its cultural and authorial connections. In fact, the study of literary text is only one element of the New Historicist's exploration of the poetics of culture.

This exploration draws upon the insights of Structuralism and Post-Structuralism theory. Some of the assumptions of the New Historicist also are reminiscent of the Marxist view of the dynamics of culture. Like the Marxist critic, the New Historicist explores the place of literature in an on-going contest for power within society but does not define this contest narrowly in terms of an economic class struggle. Lynn Hunt argued that events in history are unique and cannot be repeated and says that:

To understand the event, one must leave one's present context of understanding and view it from the historical context of that event.

Hermeneutics is art of interpreting the historical contexts of events in human life. Experience is essentially interpretive and rationality is also socially and historically contextualized and conditioned. (139)

Within the ranks of the New Historicism, literature is considered to be one of the social forces that contribute to the making of individuals and it acts as a form of social control. Although most New Historicists are scrupulous to distinguish themselves from Marxist critics, the fact remains that the central task of the New Historicism is the same as that of Marxist criticism. First to call into question the traditional view of literature as an autonomous realm of discourse with its own problems, forms, principles, activities and then to dissolve the literary text into the social and political context from which it issued.

New Historicism tries explicitly to solve the theoretical difficulty in Marxist criticism of relating the cultural superstructure to the material base. Its claim to newness might be put in terms of its claim to having solved that problem. Clifford Geertz sheds light on the role of history in the study of New Historicism as:

History here is not a mere chronicle of facts and events, but rather a complex description of human reality and evolution of preconceived notions. Literary works may or may not tell us about various factual aspects of the world from which they emerge, but they will tell us about prevailing ways of thinking at the time. Ideas of social organization, prejudices, taboos, etc. (71)

Literature provides one venue in which this web of conflicting discourses can be heard. While the traditional socio-historical critic seeks to articulate a single

determinate social meaning in the text, the New Historicist seeks to acknowledge the episteme of culture. It is the multiplicity of perspectives that define the historical reality reflected in the text. This episteme of culture embodies cultural codes used in the crucial social process of exchange. Out of the conflicting discourses and countervailing forces of exchange within a culture, its direction and destiny emerges.

This New Historicist definition of the historical reality in which literature is embedded has led to some striking new strategies of critical interpretation. The New Historicist can have a refocused interest in the textual structures so vital to the Formalist because these reflect cultural forces of constraint and mobility. But the New Historicist understanding of culture also deprives literature of its special artistic status accorded to it by formalism. Literature is not autonomous but only one of a number of cultural texts. In order to understand the meaning of literature in the context of the poetics of culture, the New Historicist must attend to extra-literary materials.

This exploration of literature is challenging enough, but New Historicists often acknowledge their own participation in the cultural discourse of the text. Borrowing from the insights of Reader-Response theory, the New Historicist recognizes that the predispositions and biases the reader brings to the text influence and contribute to the episteme of its meaning. Jerome McCann adds that:

New historicism has made its biggest mark on literary studies of the Renaissances and Romantic periods and has revised notions of literature as privileged, apolitical writing. New Historicism focuses on the way literature expresses and sometimes disguises power relations at work in the social context in which the literature was produced. Often this involves making connections between a literary work and other kinds of texts. Literature is often shown to negotiate conflicting

power interests. (159)

Steven Greenblatt has been the guiding force in New Historicist criticism, and since he writes in the field of Renaissance studies, that was the first period to generate lots of New Historicist criticism. It has since become important in criticism of Medieval, and nineteenth century British and American literature, and is working its way through criticism of modernist literature and eighteenth century literature. Post-modernism tends to have identifiable, but often obscure connections to contemporary history, challenging new historicist critics to be extremely sophisticated about how history is represented in a postmodernist work.

### **Scope of New Historicism**

All history is subjective. In interpreting historical facts or identifying historical contexts, the commentator actually expresses his or her own beliefs, habits of thought or biases. The attempt of traditional historical criticism to identify a unified worldview of a society or period is a reductive illusion. Culture is a web of conflicting discourses that cannot be simplified into a single point-of-view or linear set of ideas. Literature is only one of many historical discourses contributing to the definition of a culture. As such it dramatizes culture in action. As much as politics or military campaigns, literature dramatizes a battleground of competing ideas and values within a culture. Wesley Morris points out the use of culture to analyze New Historicism as:

The New Historicists combat empty formalism by pulling historical considerations to the center stage of literary analysis. Following Clifford Geertz, Victor Turner and other cultural anthropologists, New Historicists have evolved a method of describing culture in action. They seize upon an event or anecdote and re-read it in such a way as to reveal through the analysis of tiny particulars the behavioral codes,

logics and motive forces controlling a whole society. (261)

The historical commentator of literature does not reveal the objective meaning or absolute truth of a text but only participates in a historical discourse that often reveals as much about the commentator as about the text. In order to assess the significance of a literary text, the critical reader begins by describing the complex web of attitudes, values, ideals and points-of-view in the literary text that comprise its expression of the poetics of culture, the episteme of that historical moment. The critical reader must also acknowledge his own predispositions and cultural biases while exploring how the multiple voices within a text are balanced, reconciled or subverted.

New Historicism underscores the impermanence of literary criticism. Current literary criticism is affected by and reveals the beliefs of our times in the same way that literature reflects and is reflected by its own historical contexts. New Historicism acknowledges and embraces the ideas that, as times change, so will our understanding of great literature. According to Stephen Greenblatt, the role of the New Historicist is to create:

A more cultural or anthropological criticism which will be conscious of its own status as interpretation and intent upon understanding literature as part of a system of signs that constitutes a given culture. Literary criticism and cultural critique are integrated, with the critic's role being to investigate both the social presence to the world of the literary text and the social presence of the world in the literary text.  
(118)

New Historicists argue that the best framework for interpreting literature is to place it in its historical context. What contemporaneous issues, anxieties and struggles

does the work of literature reflect? Images and narratives do important cultural work. They function as a kind of workshop where cultural problems, hopes and obsessions are addressed or avoided. New Historicist criticism tries to relate interpretive problems to cultural-historical problems. New Historicists also tend to stress that authors and poets are not secular saints. New Historicist critics often point out places in artists' work where their attitudes do not anticipate our own, or may even be distasteful to us.

A New Historicist looks at literature in a wider historical context, examining both how the writer's times affected the work and how the work reflects the writer's times. For example, when studying Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*, one always comes to the question of whether the play shows Shakespeare to be anti-Semitic. The New Historicist recognizes that this isn't a simple yes-or-no answer that can be teased out by studying the text. This work must be judged in the context in which it was written. Studying the history reveals more about the text than studying the text reveals more about the history. The New Historicist also acknowledges that his examination of literature is tainted by his own culture and environment.

### **Opportunities for New Historicism**

In New Historicist interpretation, history is not viewed as the cause or the source of a work. Instead, the relationship between history and the work is seen as dialectic. The literary text is interpreted as product and producer, end and source of history. One undeniable side benefit of such a view is that history is no longer conceived, as in some vulgar historical scholarship. At the same time it must not be thought that the New Historicism dispenses with the cognitive category of priority.

For the New Historicist it is ideology, not history, which is prior. The literary text is said to be a constituent part of a culture's ideology by virtue of passing it on. If



it didn't, the critic could not discern a relationship between work and ideology and if the ideology were not prior to the work, it wouldn't be a historical relationship. The philosopher Michael Oakeshott has pointed out that a student of the past cannot learn the history of something without first discovering what kind of thing it is. In this respect he says that:

The New Historicism is not a genuine historical inquiry. It does not inquire into the true nature of literary works because it is confident it already knows what they are. They are agents of ideology. Contrary to appearances, the movement is not an effort to discover what it means for a literary work to be historical. It is really little more than an attempt to get literary works to conform to a particular vision of history. (48)

New Historicism establishes itself upon four main contentions. (1) Literature is historical, which means that a literary work is not primarily the record of one mind's attempt to solve certain formal problems and the need to find something to say. It is a social and cultural construct shaped by more than one consciousness. The proper way to understand it is through the culture and society that produced it. (2) Literature is not a distinct category of human activity. It must be assimilated to history, which means a particular vision of history. (3) Like works of literature, man himself is a social construct, the sloppy composition of social and political forces as there is no such thing as a human nature that transcends history. Renaissance man belongs inescapably and irretrievably to the Renaissance and there is no continuity between him and us. History is a series of ruptures between ages and men. (4) As a consequence, the historian/ critic are trapped in his own historicity. No one can rise above his own social formations, his own ideological upbringing, in order to understand the past on

its terms. A modern reader can never experience a text as its contemporaries experienced it. The whole point of the New Historicist enterprise, Jean E. Howard says:

It is to grasp the terms of the discourse which made it possible for contemporaries to see the facts of their own time in a particular way indeed, made it possible to see certain phenomena as facts at all. At first glance, this objective appears to be little different from that of traditional historical interpretation. The discourse of the past is grasped in its own terms. But what has been subtly introduced is a comparison.

(9)

Such an approach stands traditional historical scholarship on its head. The first principle of traditional scholarship was that the recovery of the original meaning of a literary text is the whole aim of critical interpretation. But New Historicism premises that the recovery of meaning is impossible. What practitioners of the new method are concerned with is the recovery of the original ideology which gave birth to the text and which the text in turn helped to disseminate throughout a culture. In the New Historicist view, it had never been widely attempted because literary texts themselves suppress the means by which they construct ideology. A traditional formalistic approach, treating the text as self-contained, can never locate these ideological operations. Only a historicist approach, treating the text as one element in the ideology of an age, can hope to lay them bare.

Although the movement represents itself, in reality its key assumptions are derived from the institutional milieu in which it arose. Its concepts and categories are simply those which have conditioned a large part of the literary thought within the university. Thus, the New Historicism is critical of the enabling presumptions of its

more distant predecessors. For instance, the movement follows post structuralism in its assurance that literary works mean any number of things to any number of readers. New Historicists are therefore free to find the warrant for their interpretations not in the author's intentions for his work but in the ideology of his age. Complimenting Michel Foucault for his contribution to the development of New Historicism, Catherine Belsey writes:

New Historicists aim simultaneously to understand the work through its historical context and to understand cultural as well as to investigate the intellectual history and cultural history through literature. The approach owes much of its impetus to the work of Michel Foucault, who based his approach both on his theory of the limits of collective cultural knowledge and on his technique of examining a broad array of documents in order to understand the episteme of a particular time. Using Foucault's work as a starting point, New Historicism aims at interpreting a literary text as an expression of or reaction to the power-structures of the surrounding society. (144)

The New Historicist effort to assimilate the literary text to history is guaranteed by the poststructuralist doctrine of textuality, which states that the text is not aloof from the surrounding context. That there is contiguity, an ebb and flow, between text and whatever might once have been seen as outside it. Yet these ideas are obtained secondhand. They are not established by original inquiry or argument. They are simply the precipitate of an academic climate in which a plurality of meanings is recognized as offering the greatest good for the greatest number of literary scholars and in which the reassimilation of text to context is the goal of practically everybody.

Despite its theoretical sheen, New Historicism is strikingly unphilosophical about problems of knowledge raised by its methods of interpretation. Movement writers never explain how it is that, though we are unable to recover the original meaning of a literary text, we are nevertheless able to reconstruct its original ideology. Nor do they account for why, though we cannot experience a text from an earlier age as its original readers would have experienced it. The New Historicism's categories of history are the standard academic ones. Although the movement is publicly contemptuous of the periodization of academic history, the uses to which New Historicists put the Foucauldian notion of the *épistème* amount to very little more than the same practice under a new, improved label.

A historical age is conceived of as a structure of thought held together by the same discursive practices. But the extent and duration of an *épistème* is never fixed, and how one can be distinguished from another is never explained, except by the use of such labels as Renaissance or Victorian England. New Historicism is claimed to be a more neutral approach to historical events, and is sensitive towards different cultures. Linking the emergence of New Historicism to that of a corporation, D. G. Myers writes:

Thus the New Historicism in literary study has emerged in this decade not so much in the spirit of counter-insurgency as after the manner of a corporate reorganization. It has been a response not to literature but to literary studies. It has been called forth not by the subject matter under study—not by actual poems, novels, plays—but by the institutional situation in which young scholars now find themselves. (29)

None of these doubts is likely to dampen the enthusiasm within English departments for the new movement. The vindication is simply too persuasive. New

Historicism offers to students of literature the joy of new explanations and new paradigms. It does not designate an unexplored area of scholarly investigation. It does not raise new problems or new questions. If its attempts to historicize literary study were merely an inducement to look into new kinds of documents, to ask about the relation of literature to social history in a new way, the movement would perform a service for scholarship. The New Historicism is instead an academic specialty in the same sense that feminism is. New Historicists like to picture themselves as challenging the institution of criticism. As jobs are created for New Historicists and space in the critical journals is set aside for their essays, the pressure on younger scholars and graduate students to enlist in the movement becomes enormous.

### **III. Rise of African American Consciousness in Meridian**

The novel *Meridian* depicts the warped minds and hearts of blacks living in the South in the 1960s. It focuses on women's lives and examines how the past and the present interconnect and construct the future. It is set against the turbulent backdrop of the civil rights movement, which gained force in the 1960s, triggering sit-ins, demonstrations and protests against the racist and segregationist policies that controlled and shaped the lives of African Americans in the South. The novel also takes a complicated look at black-white and black-black relations. It seems inadequate in this novel either to see people solely in terms of race or solely in terms of individual personalities.

Walker seems to support an ethics based on personal interaction more than on universal rules. Meridian is a young black woman, who is slightly crazy, yet completely involving and entertaining. She is very different from other people because she feels things more acutely, sensitively and strongly than other people. Her emotions, anger, hate, pain, suffering, are all depicted with startling clarity. She is a civil rights worker who is deeply afraid that her people and race will dehumanize themselves and lose their souls.

*Meridian* is an eye-opening novel that provides insight into the life of a young black female growing up during the civil rights movement. She is born to a former schoolteacher who feels resentful of her children for stealing her freedom. Her mother has refused to tell her anything about sex, and she only learns about it when she gets molested in a local funeral home. Then she begins her relationship with Eddie mainly because she wants a boyfriend to protect her from all the other men around. And the demise of their relationship comes about when Eddie finally notices that Meridian

does not enjoy having sex with him.

In ignorance, she gets pregnant without realizing what it is and has to leave high school. She has control over her body, as she discards her image as a sexual object in the eyes of men:

It seemed to Meridian that her legacy from her mother's endurance, her unerring knowledge of rightness and her pursuit of it through all distractions, was one she would never be able to match. It never occurred to her that her mother's and her grandmother's extreme purity of life was compelled by necessity. They had not lived in an age of choice. (124)

When she is offered a college scholarship for her work in civil rights, she gives her baby away to relatives and goes. It is here that one of the interesting periods of her life takes place in Saxon College in Atlanta. She feels that giving up her child is a sin and a shame, and after aborting Truman's baby, she is sterilized. She is haunted by having failed to win her mother's love, by the great lack of mothering, nurture and by her own failure as a mother. Her inability to forgive cripples her. At the same time she is aware that without that harsh choice, she would have accomplished nothing. Her life would have been wasted and she would have taken out her emptiness and frustration on her baby, whom she could not love.

Meridian's guilt and profound sense of loss after she relinquishes her first child in order to attend college, and then later aborts a second pregnancy, causes her to question more deeply the use of retaliatory violence in the struggle for civil rights. Her troubled relationship to her own mother makes her literally sick with feelings of maternal inadequacy. Thus instead of trying to fight back during the student confrontation with police, she welcomes, masochistically, "the clubs smashing down

on her from above” (97). Even after she has worked through her guilt, Meridian comes to appreciate the tragic role of violence in the civil rights revolution in terms related to her experience as a parent.

She selflessly helps others in order to compensate for the guidance which she never received from her mother. The work, coupled with her bravery and determination, result in the emergence of a calm, sustaining and growing self-awareness. Describing Meridian’s mother, Walker writes:

Her mother was not a woman who should have had children. She was capable of thought and growth and action only if unfettered by the needs of dependents, or the demands, requirements, of a husband. Her spirit was of such fragility that the slightest impact on it caused a shattering beyond restoration. (63)

Meridian is a silent, eccentric, and determined woman who has held onto her strength and dignity despite the many hardships she has faced throughout her life. At the age of seventeen, she is left on her own to consider what to do with her life and her child's. When she says no to motherhood, she offends and loses her own mother, her family, and her community. She feels guilty for leaving her baby, and cannot adequately explain why she must. But by shedding her prescribed happy mother role and standing up for her own needs, she takes the first steps toward becoming independent. She stops living by others' standards, learns to bloom for herself, as she must in order to survive, since her rebellious acts will alienate her from the rest of society.

The battle fatigue Meridian encounters as a result of working in the Civil Rights Movement turns into emotional fatigue brought on by the endless guilt she feels for putting her child up for adoption. Even though she knows her child is better



off without his seventeen-year-old mother, she cannot forgive herself for giving him away. She feels that she has abandoned both her son and her own heritage:

Meridian knew that enslaved women had laid down their lives, gladly, for their children that the daughters of these enslaved women had thought 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 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. (91)

Meridian does not object to children, or mothers bearing children, but to the role a woman is expected to play once she becomes a mother. According to this role, a mother should sacrifice her individual personality and concerns in order to live for her children. Unfortunately, the only way she can escape this unwanted role is to leave her child and family, accepting her own mother's disapprobation. And to do so she must first learn to shed the guilt this action produces. Her guilt becomes so great it prevents her from seeing or moving freely.

### **Meridian's Role in The Civil Rights Movement**

The novel *Meridian* affirms the movement's vision of freedom and nonviolence. It affirms blackness and African American heritage in a racist society that failed to value and destroys black lives. By focusing on Meridian, it focuses on black women and their participation in the Movement, refusing to make them less than they had been. Meridian combines the black consciousness and feminist consciousness that grew out of the Civil Rights Movement. Her struggle is personal and spiritual, a struggle with the ideal of nonviolence. Talking of the camaraderie among the young generation, Meridian notices that:

As they walked, people began to engage each other in loud, even ringing, conversation. They inquired about each other's jobs. They asked after members of each other's families. They conversed about the weather, And everywhere the call for Coca-Colas, for food, rang out. Popcorn appeared, and along their route hot- dog stands sprouted their broad. Multicolored umbrellas. (184)

Meridian becomes actively involved in the civil rights movement, although she must conceal this from the university. She successfully encourages others to join the movement, and they go from door to door trying to convince others to have the courage to vote. Her life is filled with many unique people and events that shape her into a seemingly worry free woman, the outcome being the opposite of what would normally be expected with her experiences. The movement reaffirms African Americans' connection to each other as a people and to their history of struggle against oppression. It also allows Meridian to claim her self and to claim the lives of African American women of the rural South as the subject of her fiction.

With her active participation in the Civil Rights Movement, Meridian is energized by a younger generation coming into its full power and raising its voice in dissent against the institutional racism that prevailed through the 1960s. Through occasionally violent protests and demonstrations, Meridian and other activists attempt to institute change and alter perceptions. They ultimately find various degrees of satisfaction with the goals and ideals of the civil rights movement. Meridian feels that she will always stand on the fringes of the movement since she is unprepared to take her dissent to a radical, if not murderous, level. Her new understanding enables her to imagine a place for herself and her nonviolence in the future as:

Perhaps it will be my part to walk behind the real revolutionaries-those who know they must spill blood in order to help the poor and the black and when they stop to wash off the blood and find their throats too choked with the smell of murdered flesh to sing. If I can only do that, my role will not have been a useless one after all. (203)

Meridian is equally determined to free black people, but she must continue the struggle alone, after the movement has been declared dead. She lives among the poorest blacks in the rural South, “like the Civil Rights Workers used to do” (31), becoming poor like them, leading them in nonviolent protest marches to improve conditions in their communities and persisting in registering them to vote, “as their smallest resistance” (191). Her struggle is also personal and spiritual, a struggle with the ideal of nonviolence.

As years pass, her co-workers quit and move into comfortable houses. She moves deeper south, living in whatever housing the community can afford to give in exchange for her constant work on their behalf. Frequently, after staging a rally or other event, Meridian develops partial paralysis. She grows more and more ill. A halo-like light surrounds her head as she thinks of the history of her people and of her role in that history.

### **The Transformation of Meridian Hill**

Meridian seems accepting of religion near the novel’s conclusion, but she in fact rejects traditional notions of God and is attracted to church. Moreover, she dismisses the notion of death as salvation. As she lies dying on the floor in the closing chapters, she decides that Black history has too many martyrs and leaves to regain her physical health. She comes across as an independent character taking control over her own life and severing herself from anything that diminishes her hard-won sense of

self. Meridian also escapes her loveless marriage and the burden of child-rearing. She decides not to waste her life, as she feels her mother has, and devotes herself to a cause she finds meaningful, the Civil Rights Movement. Mrs. Hill, fearing Meridian's eventual escape from the domesticity trap, tries to make Meridian feel guilty for committing herself to something other than the baby.

Her illness is in some ways manifestation of her instability and insecurity. Her bouts of lost consciousness and paralysis signal that she is a woman without an identity or a sustaining inner life. Ultimately, she realizes that her power lies in her unique and unwavering courage. In school, she is unable to finish a speech because she knows that there is no truth in the words she speaks, "Meridian was trying to explain to her mother that for the first time she really listened to what she was saying, knew she didn't believe it, and was so distracted by this revelation that she could not make the rest of her speech" (33).

Meridian's life is shaped by those moments when she remains silent although those around her demand that she speak. She could not publicly repent, despite her mother's urgings. She could not utter the patriotic speech she was assigned in high school and she could not proclaim that she would kill for the revolution when her comrades expected her to. She is tormented by her peers' hissing, "Why don't you say something?" (28), and by the memory of her mother pleading.

But her strategy does not prevent her from feeling guilt both for not conforming to the standards of her family and friends, and for not being able to speak out effectively. Her life is filled with many unique people and events that shape her into a seemingly worry free woman. Walker writes about her defiance as:

She had once attended an oratorical competition at her old high school, where Meridian was well on her way to distinguishing herself.

Meridian was reciting a speech that extolled the virtues of the Constitution and praised the superiority of The American Way of Life. The audience cared little for what she was saying, and of course they didn't believe any of it, but they were rapt, listening to her speak so passionately and with such sad valor in her eyes. (121)

One of the first obvious examples of Meridian's individuality is when she rejects religion at a very young age despite her mother's devout Christian beliefs. In school, she is unable to finish a speech because she knows that there is no truth in the words she speaks. "Meridian was trying to explain to her mother that for the first time she really listened to what she was saying, knew she didn't believe it, and was so distracted by this revelation that she could not make the rest of her speech" (118). This passage reveals the intellect that overpowers her emotion developing in Meridian.

Another example is how Meridian is able to be a nonconformist when she gives up family life and motherhood when she has the opportunity to attend college. Her feelings are well explained in this passage. "When she gave him away she did so with a light heart. She did not look back, believing she had saved a small person's life" (91). Although Meridian feels it will be best for the child as well as for herself, this decision causes great disturbance within her because of her mother's disapproval. But her new understanding enables her to imagine a place for herself and her nonviolence in the future:

Perhaps it will be my part to walk behind the real revolutionaries-those who know they must spill blood in order to help the poor and the black -and when they stop to wash off the blood and find their throats too choked with the smell of murdered flesh to sing, I will come forward

and sing from memory songs they will need once more to hear. For it is the song of the people, transformed by the experience of each generation, that holds them together, and if any part of it is lost the people suffer and are without soul. If I can only do that, my role will not have been a useless one after all. (198)

Meridian enters college after she has made many important decisions, and she has also volunteers to work for voter registration. It is a decision that foreshadows further resistance throughout the novel. When Meridian enters college, she does so knowing that she will better herself. One of the first determinism is to give the wild child a chance in society, and then, after the wild child's tragic and sudden death, give her a proper funeral. After being denied the opportunity by the authorities, the reaction from Meridian and other students is devastating. "The students sang through tears that slipped like melting pellets of sleet down their grieved and angered cheeks" (48).

Although struggling with her own identity, she still acts as a servant and a saint among her people. For example, when black people were not allowed to swim in the public swimming pool, the mayor refused to build them one of their own. After several children drowned in floods while swimming in ditches that served as makeshift pools, the city officials were taught a lesson by Meridian. "It was Meridian who had led them to the mayor's office, bearing in her arms the bloated figure of a five-year-old boy who had been stuck in the sewer for two days before he was raked out with a grappling hook" (191). By turning to the songs and stories of her cultural heritage, she finds a way to serve her people. She can speak out against racist patriarchal hegemony, rather than standing silent and alone in the margins.

One of Meridian's most difficult struggles is to forgive herself for her

perceived failings. If she can learn to love and respect herself, she can see her moments of silence as legitimate acts of rebellion against a system that would deny her individuality. Otherwise, she can only view her silences as examples of the times she has failed her family and friends. In the course of the novel, she learns to turn to folk traditions for expression and inspiration. Reluctant to depend on her own words, she relies on stories of defiant actions by women who went before her.

Meridian lives on her own, separated from her family and the cadre that has rejected her. She moves from place to place in this novel, sprinkling little pieces of resolve into the minds of all the townspeople who were fortunate enough to be in her presence. She presents many important issues in a subtle way, touching upon racism and prejudice, religion, and the right to human life. Meridian refuses martyrdom and chooses to live when she is able to see her connection to her people:

She understood, finally, that the respect she owed her life was to continue to live it, and not to give up any particle of it, without a fight to the death, preferably not her own. And that this existence extended beyond herself to those around her because the years in America had created them one Life. (212)

Alone, she performs spontaneous and symbolic acts of rebellion, such as carrying a drowned black child's corpse to the mayor's office to protest the town officials' neglect of drainage ditches in black neighborhoods. Only Meridian, who struggles with questions that other characters gloss over, completes this personal transformation. Her confrontations with her personal history, family history, and racial history shape the way she chooses to live.

### **Meridian Hill: An Overview**

Meridian Hill is a thin woman with a dark thick braid and reddish-brown skin. She is neither pretty nor homely but is at her most beautiful when sad. She comes from a poor but respectable family in the South and becomes pregnant while still in high school and later finds herself with a husband and a son she cannot love. Her only satisfaction comes from working with civil rights workers registering voters, a campaign she joins in 1960 after the workers' headquarters is bombed. Describing her protagonist, Walker writes that:

She wore a long Indian bedspread skirt – yellow, with brown and black elephants– and a loose black blouse embroidered with flowers and small mirrors around the neck. Intricately worked gold earrings dangled against her neck. Her olive complexion, which tanned golden in a day of sun, was now chalk-white, her eyes were red- veined and her eyelids drooped. Her dark hair was tangled and dull. (149)

Meridian is set on a path to greater self-realization and endures the hardships of firmly and irrevocably establishing her identity amid the chaos of social upheaval, sexual alienation, and people who are not always approving or supportive of either the woman or the cause. She is plagued by a mysterious inherited illness, which parallels and triggers her spiritual and physical transformation. The sickness renders her unconscious, and it subjects her to paralysis, blindness and hair loss. On one hand, the condition connects her directly with her father and great-grandmother, who suffered the same burden. The illness is also the physical rendering of Meridian's deep emotional and spiritual angst. It is the grief and sadness that have marked and gripped her throughout her life.



The illness becomes a means for Meridian to suffer, to perform penance for this ambiguous wrong she felt she has done. She ultimately heals herself and moves to the next small town. Later in the village of Chicokema, Meridian becomes ill but is at ease with poor people around her as:

There were periods in Meridian's life when it could not be perceived that she was ill. It was true that she'd lost so much of her hair that finally she had shaved her head and begun wearing a striped white and black railroad worker's cap. And it was also true that was frail and sickly- looking. But among the impoverished badly nourished black villagers– who attempted to thrive on a diet of salt meat and potatoes during the winter and fresh vegetables without meat during the summer – she did not look out of place. In fact, she looked as if she be longed.

(147)

In the end, she has ceases to be one sort of committed person and become another. Meridian is the most interesting character in the novel. With great skill and care to make Meridian believable at every stage of her development, Walker has penned the novel meticulously. For every exemplary act of bravery for the black community she pays an immediate price in her body. Asked by a group of temporary revolutionaries if she can kill for the revolution, she infuriates her friends because she cannot say an easy yes and spends a decade worrying the question.

She realizes that she suffers because she cannot accept her inability to kill, because she thinks, "I am not to belong to the future" (201). She will not give up and resolve her problems by dying. As she tells Lynne, martyrs should walk away alive instead of acting out the melodramatic last scene, "King should have refused. Malcolm, too, should have refused. 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” (151). Instead of adopting the murderous philosophy of the would-be revolutionary cadre, she has transcended it. She will not kill, or die for the revolution or any other abstract ideology.

If forced to, she would kill to preserve life. And when unable to prevent a murder, she can gather together with other mourners to grieve that death publicly. But her new understanding enables her to imagine a place for herself and her nonviolence in the future:

Perhaps it will be my part to walk behind the real revolutionaries-those who know they must spill blood in order to help the poor and the black and when they stop to wash off the blood and find their throats too choked with the smell of murdered flesh to sing, I will come forward and sing from memory songs they will need once more to hear. For it is the song of the people, transformed by the experience of each generation, that holds them together, and if any part of it is lost the people suffer and are without soul. If I can only do that, my role will not have been a useless one after all. (201)

Meridian is a young black woman, who is slightly crazy, yet completely involving and entertaining. She is very different from other people. She feels things more acutely, sensitively, and strongly than other people. Her emotions, anger, hate, pain, suffering, are all depicted with startling clarity. She is a civil rights worker, is deeply afraid that her people, and race, will dehumanize themselves and lose their souls. When she is well again, rising out of her sick bed and heading full force into the future, she can finally forgive herself and love and accept herself for who she is.

The fraught relationship that Meridian has with her mother casts a shadow

over much of her life, and she struggles to overcome this and other obstacles as she searches for self-awareness and self-acceptance. Her mother's emotional distance, disapproving nature, and moral superiority fill Meridian with guilt and sadness, which persist well into adulthood. She longs for guidance and a sense of belonging.

Unsure of the existence of God and her own relationship to the spiritual world, Meridian finds that traditional paths and explanations do not comfort her. Instead, she turns to the civil rights movement, which gains force and momentum during her young adult years. Ultimately, she struggles with her own sense of sacrifice and dedication to the cause. Feeling a gulf in her life between the ideals of the other civil rights activists and the ways by which they actually go about implementing change, Meridian returns to her roots, working and living in often-impooverished and rural communities.

Meridian selflessly helps others in order to compensate for the guidance she never received from her mother. The work, coupled with her bravery and determination, result in the emergence of a calm, sustaining, and growing self-awareness. Meridian is willing to die but does not think she can kill for the freedom of black people. She knows that it may be necessary to kill to free black people and poor people, but she cannot imagine a society created through violence in which people can be free and spiritually whole. She refuses martyrdom and chooses to live when she is able to see her connection to her people:

She understood, finally, that the respect she owed her life was to continue to live it, and not to give up any particle of it, without a fight to the death, preferably not her own. And that this existence extended beyond herself to those around her because the years in America had created them one Life. (200)

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 whole and healthy, due 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. Her 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. Ultimately, she realizes that her power lies in her unique and unwavering courage.

#### IV. Conclusion

The novel *Meridian* combines the black consciousness and feminist consciousness that grew out of the Civil Rights Movement. She is very different from other people. She feels things more acutely, sensitively, and strongly than other people. Her emotions, anger, hate, pain, suffering, are all depicted with startling clarity. It is set in the American South during the 1960s and early '70s. The protagonist, Meridian, is a black woman from a southern town. She marries, has a child, gets a divorce, sends her child away, and ends up working in a voters' registration campaign, encouraging African-Americans to register. Meridian is different from her co-workers in that she interacts with people as individuals, rather than by stereotyping them. For example, while others lecture black families about the importance of voting, Meridian sits and talks with them, trying to address their basic needs of food, heat, and affection.

Meridian Hill is a silent, eccentric, and determined woman who has held onto her strength and dignity despite the many hardships she has faced throughout her life. The events leading up to the opening chapters are dispersed throughout the novel in scattered and plausible flashbacks. Her life is filled with many unique people and events that shape her into a seemingly confident and free woman, the outcome being the opposite of what would normally be expected with her experiences. Meridian moves from place to place in this novel, sprinkling little pieces of resolve into the minds of all the townspeople who were fortunate enough to be in her presence. Meridian seems accepting of religion near the novel's conclusion. Moreover, Meridian dismisses the notion of death as salvation. As she lies dying on the floor in the closing chapters, Meridian decides that black history has too many martyrs and leaves to regain her physical health.

Though frail and weak at the end of the novel, Meridian is proud of her achievements. The odyssey that Meridian has traveled is truly astonishing. She became pregnant during her late teens to a childless father. When she joined high school, she lied to her friends that she was a mother. She was a crestfallen demure girl. The Civil Rights Movement acted as a catalyst in her life. By being an active participant of the movement, a gradual and tremendous transformation comes about her. She gains confidence which in turn gives a boost to Meridian to take control of her life. It was not easy though. She had been the victim of black racial segregation and patriarchal domination. She fought against this exploitation and paved the way for other women like her to assert themselves.

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