



Between Race and Human Rights: Meridian Hill's Therapeutic Journey as a Civil Rights and Human Rights Activist in Alice Walker's Meridian

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ABSTRACT: Alice Walker, a staunch advocate and protector of human rights, wrote the novel, *Meridian* (1976), which is set against the turbulent backdrop of the Civil Rights Movement and deals primarily with African American experiences with respect to their participation in the Movement. This paper, while analysing the novel, holds the view that many of the issues that we discuss as race issues specific to a particular country, region or location have actually a wider dimension, and this wider dimension is the interface of human rights crises in literature, the relationship between aesthetics and ethics. With this perspective, this paper explores the human rights violations of African Americans during and after the Civil Rights Movement by examining the protagonist, Meridian Hill's journey as a civil rights and human rights activist. It examines her take on the human rights violation of African Americans— such as the violation of the right to life and liberty, right to humane treatment, right to equality, right to work and to fair remuneration, rights of the child, rights of woman and right to vote and participate in government, during and after the Civil Rights Movement, and also the role of media in the Movement—presuming that such individual narratives, which depict the violation and exploitation, assume significance in supporting the “human rights regime.”

KEYWORDS: Human rights and literature, the Civil Rights Movement, African Americans, human rights violations, discrimination, exploitation, injustice, violence.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Literature is one of the places where the idea of human rights is constructed, and as in the U. S. Declaration of Independence is perpetuated as universal ideals like “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” It is also the place where violations of human rights have been artistically backgrounded—like setting of the plot, the context—or/and literally problematized— as the plight of the protagonist, savour of the text—like in African American literature, where we find the idea that people's social identities are tied to the kind of rights they are privileged to enjoy or to the denial of the rights they are forced to experience. Scholars like Lynn Hunt and James Dawes argue that literary studies play an important role in the understanding of human rights and to the development of human rights reign (Hunt 396; Dawes 395). Along with them, critics like Elizabeth Anker, and others argue that evolutions in narrative practice have made human rights movements possible. Although Civil Rights Movement (1954-1968), which was enthused by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), helped African Americans to become equal citizens of America theoretically, the practical situation is far away from the theory, as African Americans are still being killed, shot, raped, murdered, exploited and lynched. As Sophia McClennen and Joseph Slaughter put it: “[...] there is always a gap between the imagination of human rights and the state of their practice” (McClennen 2009, 4). So, telling stories and narratives about human rights violations are significant in human rights work, as they serve a “therapeutic process” of “giving victims an opportunity to tell their stories” (Hunt 395). Considering these views, this paper explores the Human rights violations of African Americans during and after the Civil Rights Movement, by looking at Alice Walker's second novel, *Meridian* (1976) and by examining the protagonist Meridian Hill's journey as a human rights activist.

The aim of the human rights and literature' interface is to seek to understand the social, cultural, political, economic and governance systems of a country, so as to curtail the occurrences of the violations of human rights by emotionally appealing to the readers, men and women alike. Alice Walker, an activist who fights for the equality and rights of African Americans and was an active participant in the Civil Rights Movement, understands the importance of narration (of storytelling) and of emotionally appealing to the readers. As Lynn Hunt argues human rights is a matter of storytelling and it helps in developing a sense of empathy and equality (Hunt 394). A look at Alice Walker's novel *Meridian* with a human rights' perspective assumes significance because the novel is in some respects autobiographical and is set against the turbulent backdrop of the Civil Rights Movement, which makes it like a firsthand representation of the Movement. However, the history of the Movement in the novel is not sequential as the novel begins in the present and moves backwards and forward in time, and this disregard to a chronology by Alice Walker makes the narration complex. Set largely in Georgia, Alice Walker keeps the socio-political setting of the novel as it is, and this narrative strategy of her helps in depicting the realistic situation of the time. The naturalistic representation of the lives of African Americans in the novel problematizes the complexity between white hegemonic power and human rights violations. It helps to perceive the pervasiveness of power.

The novel, *Meridian*, falls under the category of "the literature of testimony", one of the modes of human rights culture, created by Michael Galchinsky as it focuses the reader's attention on a single case rather than on a general reportage, and it seeks to establish what happened in the past for future generations (Galchinsky 2010, 10). Thus, through the story of an individual, Meridian Hill, Alice Walker depicts the story of the nation during and after the Civil Rights Movement in such a way that the future generations of African Americans can understand the historical narratives and protests, and resist the unfair practices of the state, in their own way like Meridian Hill did in the novel, if and when the white power structures try to subjugate and exploit them further. Meridian Hill's journey of becoming a civil and human rights activists is interesting to look at because the Movement is presented in the backdrop of the human rights violations during that period in the South of America.

Through *Meridian Hill*, Alice Walker represents the struggle of African Americans during the Movement and depicts the violence of all kinds, like physical, sexual, psychological, and emotional perpetuated by whites against Blacks. In that way, the novel *Meridian* depicts "[...] the hypocrisy of America's self-proclaimed status as a global humanitarian champion" (Anker 152), as it fails to protect the human rights of all of its citizens. Human rights of minorities, like African Americans, are always cut back and only the rights and interests of the majority and the powerful, the whites are taken care of by the law of the land and government agencies, as critical race theorists like Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic argue in *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*. The novel demonstrates that the violations of human rights are produced by discursive practices. Meridian Hill gets involved in the Civil Rights Movement and becomes an activist after watching an act of violence on television in the Black neighbourhood. It becomes a turning point in Meridian Hill's life, as "[...] this concerned her, gathered her attention [...] During the night – between three and four a.m. – the house was demolished by firebombs [...] not just the house, the whole cluster of houses on that street" (69-70). For the first time in her life, she starts thinking about the larger picture of the world, the condition of African Americans in the country, specifically in the South. As Karen F. Stein points out, "The incident which awakens Meridian from her trance-like stagnation is political [...]" (Stein 135). After the incident, her resistance against the white hegemony begins, as "something about the bombing had attracted her, the obliteration of the house, the knowledge that had foreseen this destruction. What would these minds, these people, be like?" (77). This act of violence, instead of intimidating her, motivates her to join the Movement, thus, her journey from ignorance to knowledge, from race consciousness to human rights consciousness begins.

Later, when Meridian Hill joins Saxon College, she thinks of joining the group of radical college intellectuals in order to fight for the rights of the people of her community. But the revolutionary group decides to adopt violent means for the Movement as they have already witnessed violence inflicted by the whites on African Americans. However, Meridian Hill, in a true spirit of being an activist, is hesitant to kill or adopt violent means, even though she is aware of the fact that "violence is as American as cherry pie" (18), and non-violence has failed in America. Nevertheless, she is compelled to make a declaration to join the Movement, "Will you kill for the Revolution?" For Meridian Hill, the violence of any kind is intolerable in any case, even if it is done with a righteous intention, "and to her, even revolutionary murder was murder" (14).

P. Tewkesbury writes about the ambivalent attitude of Meridian Hill and relates it to Alice Walker's personal views as an activist about violence during the Movement. He states, "in *Meridian*, Walker's spiritual struggle to understand the place of violence in the Movement becomes manifest in the title character's similar struggle, and the question of violence versus non-violence is one of the novel's primary issue" (615). However, apart from Meridian Hill's spiritual struggle to understand the place of violence in the Movement, the novel's primary issue is the question of adopting violence or non-violence that makes a major distinction between civil rights and human rights activism. It is here one perceives her as a humanist, for no human rights activist may

want to resort to violent means to achieve their goal. Meridian Hill again performs the role of an activist, while preferring to spend her life like a civil rights activist and to be with and very close to the people, and to create awareness about the Movement and to help people fight for their rights, justice and equality in the country. Her belief in non-violent approach is in pursuit of a peaceful and harmonious society which every human rights activist would yearn for.

Alice Walker presents the whites as a category that always systematically violates the human rights and dignity of African Americans, and always adopts violent means to violate African Americans' right to humane treatment¹ and right to life, liberty, and personal security². The experience of Tommy Odds, a fellow Civil Rights worker, who is shot while leaving a church, is an example. Though he survives, he loses the lower part of his arm. Whereas, whites being killed or shot by an African American is unheard of in the novel. Such a narrative strategy exposes the complex connection between white hegemonic power and human rights violations. During the Movement, Meridian Hill, along with other African Americans, becomes the victim of exploitation and violent behaviour of the whites. She gets beaten up and jailed many times during the marches and voter registration drives. The police and the state carry out such acts of cruelty against African Americans. This standpoint in the novel helps illustrate the gravity of human rights violations and the institutionalization of human rights violations in America during the time of the Civil Rights Movement.

Meridian Hill again witnesses physical torture and violence in the Atlanta streets, as "she saw small black children, with short, flashing legs, being chased by grown white men brandishing ax handles. She saw old women dragged out of stores and beaten on the sidewalk [...]"(95). Such violent incidents illustrate how the right to humanitarian treatment of African Americans have been violated on an everyday basis, as people of every age, whether grown-up or children, men or women, have been brutally beaten up by the whites during the Movement in order to scare them and stop them from asking and fighting for their rights. And the government agencies take no action in order to forbid inhumanly, and degrading treatment of African Americans.

Meridian Hill also despises the economic system of the country as it has created and maintained since ages the gap between the rich whites and the poor African Americans, and it always exploited and disfavoured African Americans, in such a scenario, she feels, African Americans cannot recognize their rights as they are trapped in a system which is marked with callous profiteering. African Americans in the South were systematically being kept devoid of their right to work and to fair remuneration³. Claudia Tate argues that in the novel *Meridian*, "Walker's self-proclaimed "basic antagonism towards capitalism" becomes apparent [...]" (Tate 185). In that way, both Alice Walker and Meridian Hill despise capitalism and yearn for an anti-capitalist and socialist society, which can, unlike the capitalist economy, afford to provide equal opportunities and decent standard of living to all and hence pave the way for maintaining rights and dignity of all citizens, because all human beings have certain inalienable rights.

Meridian Hill knows that if African Americans want to get equal job opportunities in this white-dominated country, they have to continuously fight against the oppressive hegemonic power structures. They have to fight for socio-political, economic, and cultural liberation in the country. The white-ruled society prevents equal opportunities as well as fair remuneration for African Americans as if the white system had the fear that if Blacks are educated, trained and skilled like whites, they would demand their rights and equality in every sphere of life and would eventually become equals to whites. The educational and job disparities lead to economic inequality, which further exacerbates their condition in the country. Alice Walker also writes about the violation of Blacks' right to work and fair remuneration in "The Civil Rights Movement: What Good Was It?," wherein at one point she sums up Martin Luther King Jr.'s words: "[...] we had a right to live anywhere in this country we chose, and a right to a meaningful well-paying job to provide us with the upkeep of our homes [...]" (Gardens 125). This shows Alice Walker is conscious of the human rights and is concerned about the fact that African Americans have been kept devoid of equal opportunity, which is essential for them to improve their economic, social, and political conditions.

¹Article 5 of Universal Declaration of Human Rights: No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.

²Article 1 of American Declaration of the Rights and Duties of Man: Every human being has the right to life, liberty and the security of his person.

³Universal Declaration of Human Rights: Article 23: Everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favourable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment.

Everyone, without any discrimination, has the right to equal pay for equal work.

American Declaration of the Rights and Duties of Man: Article 14 (Right to work and to fair remuneration): Every person has the right to work, under proper conditions, and to follow his vocation freely, insofar as existing conditions of employment permit.

Every person who works has the right to receive such remuneration as will, in proportion to his capacity and skill, assure him a standard of living suitable for himself and for his family.

Apart from the violation of the right to work and to fair remuneration, and the right to get equal job opportunities in the country, the novel also depicts the violation of the right to be born free and equal in dignity and rights⁴. The unequal treatment and the violation of the rights of African Americans is visible even in the educational institutions like Saxon College, where Meridian Hill studies. Except for the ceremony, “the Commemoration of Fast Mary of the Tower,” African American students have never given fair and equal treatment in the college.

Similarly, there is, “[...] only three black teachers on the faculty” (125), which further shows the violation of the right to equality. Moreover, those who were selected, like Miss Winter who was the school’s organist, have been considered “[...] misfit at Saxon college” (125). This disturbs Meridian Hill. Lindsey Tucker writes, “[...] the appearance of Miss Winters is important because, as one of the three black faculty members, she has risen up “against the Saxon tradition” (120), that is, against a tradition which is white and patriarchal” (Tucker 8). In that way, Miss Winter, like Meridian Hill, tries to resist the white dominion and patriarchal authority, whenever they get a chance to do so. They both challenge the stereotypical images of women by fleeing the patriarchal and racial oppression. Educational institutions aimed for spreading the message of equality, justice, values and ethics, but they are spreading injustice and discrimination. In this way, Alice Walker depicts in the novel that racism is deeply ingrained in every section of American society and there is an undeniable connection between white domination and human rights violations in America, as Meili Steele states, “how American political, legal, and social institutions continually failed to address their own imaginary?” (Meili 95). All of them failed miserably, as they never did what they preached to the rest of the world.

The violation of the right to equality of African Americans are also presented in the form of the biased and unequal treatment against African Americans by the media of the United States. The media is also part of the racial structure of the white-dominated society as, Meridian Hill says, “Black people were never shown in the news – unless of course they had shot their mothers or raped their bosses’ grandparents – and a black person or persons giving a news conference was unheard of” (69). The novel portrays that the media is biased and contributing to creating and propagating negative stereotypes about African Americans, as it always dehumanizes them. The negativity spread by media aggravates the situation further, and it develops a constant fear of death, loss, and disgust amongst both the races and makes the situation even worse for African Americans. As Elizabeth Anker says, “[...] the discursive codes popularized through media reportage not only fail to represent but can further aggravate the large-scale abuses of human rights” (154). By representing the biased attitude of the media, Alice Walker suggests the obvious reasons for such approaches, such as the ownership of media is in the hands of the white supremacist structures, the target audience is mostly the whites, and their primary focus is to popularize the whites racist ideology. As Wendy Kozol says, the media of America only promotes the hegemonic politics of the country, instead of mobilizing empathy and action against the violators (Kozol 166). In this way, Alice Walker presents that the rights of African Americans to have a dignified life, free from terror and despair, is violated by every estate of the state. Media could have played an important role in the protection of the human rights of African Americans by spreading awareness about the Movement, by reporting the negligence of the government machineries, and by showing the real and explicit scenes of violence carried out by the whites.

The novel is also rich in illustrating instances of the human rights violation of African American children⁵. In the very first chapter titled “The Last Return,” it is shown that all the workers who work in a Guano plant are African Americans and “they are too small to work in a plant” (5). Lynn Pifer, while discussing the impact of such incidents on the psyche of African American children, refers to psychologist Kenneth Clark who observes that this kind of unquestioned, all-pervasive discrimination has a detrimental effect on African American children’s self-perception (Pifer 79). Similarly, in the chapter titled “The Wild Child,” the Wild Child lives in the garbage, and she has no right to live a dignified life, as she, “[...] eating rancid food, dressing herself in castoffs, cursing and bolting, and smoking [...]” (24). There is also a young boy who has been seen with her. The boy disappears after some time, and it was rumoured that he has been stolen by the local hospital for use in experiments. But, the missing of little African American boy is not important news and it has never been investigated. As Pramod K. Nayar observes, “loss is a truth that all communities in human rights texts live with, on a daily basis” (141).

The novel also shows how Meridian Hill as a civil and human rights activist responds and reacts to the violations of the rights of children. In the chapter “The New York Times” Meridian Hill speaks about the violence against African American children, when she talks to Truman about the death of his daughter, Camara, “I owe more to all the little black kids being blown away by whitey’s racism [...] Of which your daughter is one, surely?” (148). Meridian Hill’s statement indicates that the white who enjoy a structural advantage have

⁴ Universal Declaration of Human Rights: Article 1: All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.

⁵ Article 19 (Rights of the Child) of American Convention on Human Rights describes that “every minor child has the right to the measures of protection required by his condition as a minor on the part of his family, society, and the state.”

mercilessly killed many African American children. After knowing about and witnessing such acts of brutality, Meridian Hill realises that it is her ethical responsibility, as an African American, to fight for the rights of her people. Apart from this what makes her to realize this is the fact that Meridian herself is guilty as she herself has violated the right to life of her own children twice, firstly, when she gives away her own child in order to attend college, and secondly, when she aborts Truman's child without informing him about the pregnancy. Her guilt is referred to many times in the novel, "Meridian was conscious of a feeling of guilt [...] Yet she did not know of what she might be guilty" (40). Thus, the constant guilt and the witnessing of cruelty against African American children prompt Meridian Hill to make every possible effort to help the subjugated ones.

Lauren S. Cardon, while talking about Meridian Hill's commitment to save and fight for the rights of African American children, says, "[...] Meridian's life is one of constant self-sacrifice; she endangers herself daily for members of the community, especially children" (169). At one instance, Meridian Hill finds the body of a five-year-old boy who gets drowned, when city officials drain off excess water in the lower-lying Black neighbourhood, without giving prior warning. She carries the body of the drowned boy to the white mayor's office in a rage and leads the townspeople to ask for immediate action against the violators. It is after this incident that Meridian Hill asks the people of her community promise her that they will participate in the voter registration drives and will use their right to vote as a resistance against the white authorities. The emotionalization of the situation is, in fact, political, and subsequently, the voter registration drive is the mildest form of resistance from the Blacks against the white rulers to get control over their lives, as well as for the better future of the coming generations.

However, the initial, passive response of African Americans to Meridian Hill's appeal suggests that they perceive themselves as having no rights and dignity as they have to struggle for their survival, as one of the members of her community says, "I don't have time for foolishness. My wife is dying [...] Go somewhere else and find somebody that ain't got to work all the time for pennies, like I do" (226). It also draws the readers' attention to the connection between poverty and human rights. Even when the poor African Americans understand that their rights and dignity have been violated, and therefore, they have to demand their rights, they are helpless because they are forced to concentrate more on working hard for their survival by the exploitative economic structure of the country than on the violation of rights. As Critical Race theorists postulate, the poverty and race intersect in complex ways, and hence the predicament of poor African Americans differ from their counterparts who are financially stable (Delgado 110). Meridian Hill realises that the stern socio-economic situations of the country have mugged their courage to assert their human rights and poverty has adversely affected their "free agency." Poor African Americans are caught in the survival trap, and they will do nothing beyond mourning and weeping for all the violence and injustice happening to them. Under such circumstances, they cannot afford to think about their right to vote and participate in the government, but if they will remain silent, then, it will further lead to more oppression. Nevertheless, Meridian Hill appeals to them that, in addition to mourning and weeping for the ones whom they have already lost, they have to hope for a better future for the ones who are alive, and should take radical decisions like claiming and using their right to vote and to participate in the government, and to protest against all the injustices and exploitation. Thus, in such situations of human rights crisis, Meridian Hill as an activist tries to give people hope, as Thomas Galchinsky says, "hope arises in lament because the mourners learn through their grief how to relate to the dead in a way that healing to individual grief and collective national loss" (Galchinsky 2016, 44).

The human rights violations of African American women, including Meridian Hill in the novel, indicate a major deficiency in the law of America, as it fails in protecting the human rights of African American women⁶. African American women have been treated like sex toys, "[...]while white men would climb on black women old enough to be their mothers – "for the experience" (109). At one place in the novel, Mrs Hill remembers that when she used to work as a maid in the white families, the young lusty sons of these families used to persuade her. After confronting such incidents of sexual assault, Mrs Hill says some of them liked black women for sex and said so. For the others, it was a matter of gaining experience, initiation into the adult world" (109). Alice Walker writes about the exploitation and oppression of the African American women, as she writes "[...] black women among all women have been oppressed almost beyond recognition – oppressed by everyone"

⁶Article 2(Right to equality before law) of American Declaration of the Rights and Duties of Man stipulates that "all persons are equal before the law and have the rights and duties established in this Declaration, without distinction as to race, sex, language, creed or any other factor".

American Convention on Human Rights: Article 1 (Obligation to Respect Rights): The States Parties to this Convention undertake to respect the rights and freedoms recognized herein and to ensure to all persons subject to their jurisdiction the free and full exercise of those rights and freedoms, without any discrimination for reasons of race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, economic status, birth, or any other social condition.

American Convention on Human Rights: Article 24 (Right to Equal Protection): All persons are equal before the law. Consequently, they are entitled, without discrimination, to equal Judicial Protection of the law.

(Gardens 149). The novel portrays that African American women have no claim of their rights and dignity as oppressive forces like patriarchy and the white control, dominate and commodify them, which results in creating in them a feeling of humiliation and inferiority.

The human rights violation of Meridian Hill as a woman is presented in the novel as psychological effects that shape her identity, decisions and existence. She meets different men at different stages of her life and realizes the fact that all men hold the same notion that it is their right to own and disown her and to exploit and conquer her body. The lover of her adolescent age, and later when Meridian Hill visits a doctor for an abortion, Mr Raymond, a university professor, and even Truman Held, who leaves Meridian for white women when he finds that Meridian Hill was once married and has a child, all behave in a particular pattern. It suggests that masculine forces, irrespective of their race, age, class, education, or profession, commoditise women. However, when the novel describes the human rights abuses, it concentrates not on the violations of human rights per se, but instead, on the physical, emotional, and psychological pain inflicted because of the violations of human rights on the woman like Meridian Hill, who bears everything for the welfare of her community but subsequently experiences illness and decayed health.

Alice Walker presents Meridian Hill as a woman who abandons everything to join the Civil Rights Movement and to become an activist. She is seen ignoring her familial relationships and even her decaying health. Lynn Pifer writes about Meridian Hill's devotion as a civil and human rights activist, thus: "[...] by shedding her prescribed "happy mother" role and standing up for her own needs, Meridian takes the first step towards becoming a "revolutionary petunia" (Pifer 84). Alice Walker's female protagonist does not follow the prescribed notions of being a perfect woman; instead, she chooses to assert her freedom and the right to determine the course of her own life, despite her various but traumatic experiences due to the faulty step in the teenage love affairs, childbearing, abandoning of the child, guilt, and subsequent psychological problems, physical and mental tortures during the Movement, her friends' initial desertion of her, and succeeding ill health. As an escape from her memories, Meridian Hill, as a civil rights activist, devotes her life to a noble cause—the welfare of African Americans—as she realizes that they are systematically and continuously being excluded and denied to social, cultural, and political representation in the society, and kept devoid of their rights, which include the right to vote, right to participate in the government, right to government services, right to use public facilities, etc., which are essential components of a fair and democratic society in which all races could live together with equal opportunities, peace and harmony. She takes part in the Movement effort to ask for full and equal citizenship of all the people because she knows that the law of the land has failed to protect the civil and human rights of all its citizens. She helps African Americans to imagine "a rights-respecting world" which will not exist until people of every race, class, and gender can imagine it (Galchinsky 2010, 16).

Critics have acclaimed the character of Meridian Hill in Alice Walker's *Meridian* a civil rights activist. However, when Meridian Hill performs her work as a civil rights activist without resorting to violent and inhuman means, she becomes a genuine human rights activist. Since she works as an activist aiming to protect the life, liberty, and dignity of African Americans, and propagates amongst them the idea of the right to education, freedom from torture, freedom of speech and movement, and fair trial and so on, she is a human rights activist as well. In that sense, Meridian Hill through her activism among African Americans merges her two identities—as a Black woman and as an activist—and continues her journey as an activist, and also inspires others, like Truman Held, who in the end decides to follow the path of activism without thinking about personal interests and profits. Alice Walker's narratives about human rights violations in the novel and Meridian Hill's life story as a civil rights activist are significant in human rights work, not only because they serve a "therapeutic process" of giving the female victim an opportunity to tell her story but also because her activism itself is an act of sublimation and a therapeutic process coming out of the guilt and mental trauma created by her own unexpected acts of the violation of human rights of children.

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