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# A Study of Alice Walker's *Meridian* as an Eponymous Protagonist's Journey from Ignorance to Self-Actualization

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## Abstract:

The novel *Meridian* reviews the life journey of the eponymous female protagonist. During the era of slavery in America, being born into a black family was a great curse, and being a woman in it was a subject of unimaginable torture. Meridian Hill is born to parents who are financially independent. Her mother also does not want children but once she has children, she takes care of them responsibly. Mrs. Hill's failure to discipline their daughter Meridian results in Meridian becoming a mother of one at seventeen, being expelled from school, and divorcing her husband, Eddie. After the birth of her child she becomes aware of the responsibility and takes a bold decision to hand over her child to her mother in law for upbringing and enrolls herself in Saxon Institute for her further education. After learning about the Civil Rights Movement, she realizes that this is the goal of her life and she associates herself with this movement for the rest of her life. Even though motherhood is a very intimate thing for a woman, Meridian rejects motherhood and even rejects religion. Although this is a big step, she proves that she is modern by boldly rejecting orthodox ideas. Truman comes into her life and gives her more clarity about life. Meridian is very supportive of Truman and his white wife, Lynne. Meridian has now moved beyond this relationship and sees the individual as an integral part of society, and in that spirit helps everyone. This revolutionary change in Meridian is astounding. A very ordinary black woman has achieved a very high mental state of self-actualization through extreme ups and downs.

**Keywords:** - Civil Rights Movement, Oppression, Struggle, Self-actualization, Black, Feminism, Motherhood, Struggle, etc.

*Meridian* is the second novel by Alice Walker, published in 1976. The novel describes the life journey of a very ordinary African American woman who is the eponymous protagonist. The plot of the novel unfolds against the backdrop of the Civil Rights Movement in America in the 1960s. At the heart of the novel is the drastic transformation in the role of the female protagonist of the novel Meridian Hill. This is a journey of self-discovery of an ordinary woman in the extremely volatile era. The plot of the novel revolves around the elements of racial discrimination, equal rights, equal status and freedom in society.

The most important discovery in the novel is Self-Actualization. It is astounding how an ordinary woman can find her purpose in life under such adverse circumstances. It is certainly astonishing that she treads the difficult path of self-discovery alone with experience from the events that happened in her life, the people she met. The psychologist Abraham Maslow is credited with first introducing the concept of self-actualization. This concept assumes that the latent potential in a person is fully developed and realized by that person. Self-actualization is the act that a person wants to do for self-pleasure and the satisfaction that he gets after all his basic needs are fulfilled and he is freed from the cycle of ego. "What a man can be, he must be. This need we may call self-actualization" (Maslow, 93).

In the 1960s, the feminist movement contributed greatly to the cultural freedom of women. In the novel *Meridian*, the idea of the feminist movement is largely purged. In this novel, a big question mark has been raised on the role of motherhood which is very important in a woman's life. Meridian's mother Mrs. Hill is also very rebellious about the role of motherhood. Looking at the difference in nature between Meridian's mother and father, it is hard to say that they are made for each other. Mr. Hill and Mrs. Hill are both teachers by profession. Mr. Hill is very calm, sincere and clean personality while Mrs. Hill is a thinking creative personality. This family, which is financially prosperous, is also well known in the society. After their marriage, Mrs. Hill gets introduced to post-marital problems. When they had their first child then Mrs. Hill feels a tremendous responsibility. Mrs. Hill is confused by this responsibility because until now she has only thought about herself, but after this she has to put all her priorities aside and think only about the needs of the baby. Mrs. Hill thinks that she has been caught into a trap. Mrs. Hill feels that although the responsibility of motherhood is so serious, no one has made her realize the importance of it.

Mrs. Hill realizes that her personal life is over. Many women in the society are living only for children, henceforth she also wants to live only for babies. She realizes very acutely that children are a kind of burden. The feeling that an unwanted responsibility has suddenly been imposed on her and that she has no chance of escaping from it depresses her. Mrs. Hill wants to return to the teaching profession but things have changed a lot. Due to the responsibilities of children, she does not get enough time to study anymore. She is now finding it difficult to pass the exam required for a teaching position and will no longer be able to match the new generation of students in the classroom. It becomes impossible to satisfy own desires and aspirations while satisfying the feelings of others.

After Meridian grew up Mrs. Hill used to give her two pieces of advice, 'Keep your panties up and your dress down' and 'be sweet', but she didn't give the teenage girl enough ideas about sex.

As a result Meridian also repeats her mother's mistake and gives birth to a child at the age of just seventeen. Meridian is not mentally competent to take responsibility for the child. She was still only seventeen. A drop-out from high school, a deserted wife, a mother, a daughter in law" (Walker, 73).

Meridian eventually hands over her baby to the mother in law and is freed from the responsibility of the child. Mrs. Hill dislikes her daughter for not raising the child. Even though Meridian's mother did not want children, she dutifully raised them with utmost responsibility. "I just don't see how you could let another woman raise your child," she said. "It's just selfishness; you ought to hang your head in shame. I have six children," she continued self-righteously, "though I never wanted to have any, and I have raised everyone myself" (Walker, 88).

Refusing to raise children in a context where slavery has forever torn countless children from their parents is a betrayal of our ancestors. Meridian's great great grandmother, who had two children sold, cleverly got her children back by promising her owner to provide for them. Even though Meridian's grandmother took responsibility for raising the child and gained custody of the children only on the promise of earning twelve dollars for the children's education, Meridian's denial of responsibility for the newborn, despite its history of permanent separation of countless children during a time when the buying and selling of African American slaves was common, is tantamount to treason.

Meridian's mother tries to teach her to surrender to God, to have faith. Meridian tries too but finds it all annoying and never wins her mother's heart. Her father's rationality appeals more to her, so many of the decisions she takes in the novel are intellectual rather than emotional. A good example is giving her child to her mother in law.

Meridian's mother Mrs. Hill also lives her life without much compromise. Mrs. Hill stays out of politics and never votes. Being a teacher herself, she has immense respect for teachers. However, her world is limited, so she is not aware of the rapid changes in the outside world, which is why she is not able to bring up children and guide them according to their age. Mrs. Hill's neglect leads Meridian to come into contact with Eddie, a boy at high school. The friendship between the two turns into love. It is Eddie who forces the sexually cold Meridian to have sex, thereby impregnating her. Meridian leaves her mother's home to marry Eddie and becomes the mother of a son at the age of just seventeen.

Marriage to Eddie frees Meridian from the one thing she dislikes about being chased by many boys. She gets tired of chasing her, so she gets rid of this trouble after marriage. The pursuit of a black woman for sex sheds light on women's insecurities and their status as objects of consumption in society. Meridian doesn't enjoy sexual intercourse too much but Eddie is always eager for physical contact. She is expelled from school for getting pregnant while studying in high school. Eddie takes care of her during this difficult time and works as a waiter to earn money. Although it is common for husband to beat their wives in African American families, Eddie never beats Meridian. Like her mother Meridian is also very annoyed to iron his clothes. She tried to be happy in this mediocre situation.

Before Eddie, George Dexter, a mulatto, and his assistant tried to sexually assault her but were unsuccessful. The mentality which is more important is that for white people a black girl is considered public property. Black people are not behind in this kind of exploitation, they also see the girl as a property and an object of consumption. It is a stark reality that many immature black girls fall into the trap of sweet-talking boys and become victims of gender-based violence.



The first event that changed Meridian's life was the birth of her son, Eddie Junior. After this, Meridian realized the true meaning of motherhood responsibility. Suddenly her entire movements were controlled and all priorities changed. Meridian compares motherhood to slavery. She is so burdened by the feelings of motherhood that she dreams of killing herself or murdering her baby every day. She starts doubting her abilities. On the one hand she feels like she is in a vortex of despair and on the other hand she starts having doubts about Eddie. Eddie seems attracted to a girl from Dexter. Even after having a son, Eddie's behavior is the same as before. He has not realized the responsibility of a child and is still behaving like a school boy. He is also not very interested in education because he has no knowledge of society and the outside world as much as the world Meridian only knows from watching TV and listening to the news. Eddie sees no other goal than sexual pleasure. Overall the mental state of Meridian is very disturbed.

To get out of such a situation, Meridian takes a shocking decision. She entrusts her son to her mother-in-law for upbringing. Her mother doesn't like this decision, but the hardships endured by the women of the past and the sacrifices made by the mothers of the past are not possible for women nowadays. Meridian says that women did not have choices then, but today's women have plenty of choices. Meridian also receives a scholarship from a wealthy white family so she attends Saxon College for further education. Without engaging in the traditional responsibilities of motherhood, she renounces the motherly spirit and gives more importance to education because on the basis of this education she can fight against injustice in the society.

Meridian settled in Atlanta because it was a two-hour journey to college. She has left her son but a guilty conscience has formed deep in her mind. Meridian feels like a failure as a daughter first and a mother second. At Saxon College, she hides the fact that she is married and the mother of one child. From this mental stress, her physical problems begin to form. She starts suffering from hair loss and severe headaches as well as having vivid dreams that end in someone's death. She decides to concentrate on her studies to correct the failures and mistakes made so far and consider herself lucky to have the opportunity to study in such a prestigious college.

Meridian gets a lot of support from her teacher Miss. Winter in such a mentally vibrant state. Miss. Winter has no children of her own; she forms a mother-daughter relationship with Meridian. They understand the confusion of Meridian's mind and one day Miss. Winter whispers into Meridian's ear as if he's having a self-realization, his words being "I forgive you". These words clear the Meridian of despair and give him the energy to come out of the pit of despair and start a new life. All these things help Meridian to get out of his small circle and forget his own pain and look at the society in a new way.

It is true that seeing the numerous types of suffering in the society can make any person forget his own suffering or reduce the intensity of the suffering. Meridian is looking for a bigger goal but isn't clear on what exactly she wants. Meridian's moment of clarity in her life comes with a major blow. Is it the impact of a bomb blast that opens her ears and eyes? After this bomb blast, she decides to volunteer and work in the Civil Rights Movement and at the age of seventeen takes on a new role. After this, she plays this role honestly. Meridian actively participates in freedom march, sings songs, and conducts awareness programs. During the protest, the police chase her away, after she falls down, the mob runs over her. The Sheriff grabs her and kicks her but she doesn't let out a scream of pain. In a way, these events happen only to realize the latent power in her. While working in the Civil Rights Movement, she works to educate illiterate people and also does typing work. Due to all these factors, the process of major change begins in her life.

A Sojourner tree on the campus of Saxon College was a hot topic of debate among students, especially African American students. As the Sojourner tree has a dark history hidden in its plantation itself, this tree became an inspiration to the students and many legends were created about this tree. The tree was planted by a slave woman named Louvinie. Because this slave woman was ugly in appearance, she was assigned to work in the garden and the rest of the people tried their best to keep her out of sight. A legend was also created about this slave woman that no one had ever seen her smile. Louvinie was very fond of telling stories and used to tell scary stories to children. One of the children of her master is born with a very weak heart and dies after hearing a horrific story told by a slave woman, Louvinie. The slave woman is not at all at fault in this incident but is held responsible for the death of the child and severely punished by her master. The punishment is that her tongue is cut from her throat and her voice is permanently silenced. She picks up her tongue, which has been cut into the soil and trampled underfoot by her master, and digs a pit and plants a tree over it, the Sojourner tree. Now the age of this tree is forty years and it is the largest among the numerous trees there. It is believed that these trees have some divine power. It is said that the tree can speak, make music, and if a slave escapes and takes refuge in this tree, he will not be seen by anyone. A podium is built around this tree and it is believed that if a couple in love goes there, they become invisible, so many people take shelter of this tree.

Scholars and critics have argued that The Sojourner tree is a metaphor. Oral literature, music, and dance are very important in African American society. In the same way that Louvinie's tongue was cut out and her voice was forever silenced, black voices throughout history have been completely silenced. The history that has been written has been written from the point of view of white people and black people have no place in it.

The tree has become a symbol of the atrocities committed against black people during the slavery era. When Meridian sits under this tree for the first time after joining Saxon College, she feels very peaceful. She feels invisible under these big trees. While studying in the second year of college, the management tries to cut down the tree, but Meridian and the students protest to save the tree, which saves the tree by destroying the podium under the tree. Meridian gets a lot of inspiration from this tree and so she decides to take a big step and do something grand.

One of the biggest turning points in Meridian's life comes after meeting Truman Held, a professor active in the Civil Rights Movement. Truman is drawn to Meridian upon first meeting. Truman, who is aware of black women's rights, actually treats women the same as white people. Meridian decides to be with him and compromises her feelings about sex. Both actively participate in the movement and agitate for the rights of children. Meridian is also shot at for taking part in the protest in Atlanta but luckily survives. What surprises her the most is that even children are falling prey to bullying. The screams of the girls coming from the other end of the prison tell her that they are being tortured.

After a little girl named Wild Child is hit by a car, Meridian tries hard to save her but is unsuccessful. While all this is going on, a white girl named Lynne Rabinowitz arrives in the South. Truman falls in love with a white girl and eventually they get married. This incident sheds light on Truman's character. On the one hand, Truman calls Meridian the "black queen" and wants "beautiful black babies" from her, and on the other hand, he wants to equal white people by marrying a white girl. Truman wants to exhibit that he too possesses a white wife. Meridian sees all of this and observes the changes in Truman's personality, and a radical transformation begins in her. At first she wonders why Truman is doing this, that there is something lacking in her that makes her so neglected, but then she realizes it's a manly attitude and she stops hating herself.

Meridian explores her own femininity and black culture. She realizes that Truman and Lynne's marriage will not last because of cultural differences. Meridian realizes that she will no longer be trapped in such a relationship.

White girls' careers end after marriage; on the contrary, black girls who come to the city for education are ambitious and pursue their own careers in different professions. The change seen in black girls who are doing business and working is that such girls are imitating white girls as much as possible. All these traps come to Meridian's notice and she gets rid of them all. She learns about the glorious past of African Americans and is proud to be a descendant of a mighty woman like Harriet Tubman who led the army in war.

Truman can't choose between Meridian and Lynne, so she tells a confused Truman that Lynne is the perfect partner for him. Meridian doesn't want to be tied down anymore so she makes it clear to Truman, who is very conscious of his reputation in the community, that "Oh, no.... you wanted a virgin, don't you remember? You wanted a woman who was not 'sexually promiscuous'. But on the other hand, you wanted a woman who had had worldly experiences.....to match your own. Now since I already had a son, whose existence you frightened me into denying, and since you also wanted to make love to me, and since I had no worldly experience to speak of marriage between us never reached the point of discussion" (walker, 150).

Meridian gets pregnant again from Truman but she decides to have an abortion and asks the doctors to tie her tubes so that she will never have to deal with unwanted pregnancy again. Meanwhile, she decides to go to the south to work fulltime in the Civil Rights Movement. After Meridian resumes the work she loves, her worn-out physical condition begins to recover and she feels a renewed sense of energy. After Truman and Lynne's relationship becomes strained, they both return to Meridian. Meridian treats Lynne like a sister and pulls her out of the tension. After the death of Camara, Truman and Lynne's daughter, Meridian guides them even when the thing that binds them together is no longer there. Now Meridian does not think about anyone personally but only thinks about his brothers and sisters in society in a bigger perspective.

Meridian has completely freed herself from her past and is working for the society. She has shown an unusual courage and brought about a revolutionary change in herself. Now she lives not for herself but for society and raising her voice against injustice in society and making people's lives bearable has become her mission in life. Meridian has fully realized herself and fully understood the purpose of life. This journey has never been easy for her but she has risen to the challenge ably. In this way the Meridian has been self-actualized and is living in the extreme stage of 'a completeness of being'.

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