The Legacy of the Civil Rights Movement in Contemporary African American Fiction

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Double Major MA Study Programme in English Language and Literature and German Language and Literature – Teaching English and German as Foreign Languages

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Master's Thesis

Supervisor: Dr. Sanja Runtić, Full Professor

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Abstract

This master's thesis provides an analysis of Alice Walker's novels *The Color Purple* (1982) and *Meridian* (1976) in relation to the Civil Rights Movement and its legacy. It discusses the theme of African American female experience of inequality and discrimination in terms of both gender and race. The paper argues that even though their time frames differ, as *The Color Purple* is set at the beginning of the twentieth century and *Meridian* reflects the years during and following the Civil Rights Movement, the novels' main characters share the experience of double oppression by both White supremacist and patriarchal social structures. *The Color Purple* depicts the trials and tribulations in the life of its protagonist, Celie, who endures mistreatment perpetuated by Black men on a daily basis. Likewise, *Meridian* depicts racial and gender discrimination in the rural South, exposing Black women's confinement by the dominant standards of femininity. The analysis of Meridian focuses on three motifs – the story of Marilene O'Shay, the Wild Child, and the Sojourner Tree – through which it exposes the suppression of Black women's voice and their social marginalization. The paper also examines the ways in which this novel addresses the rift within the Civil Rights Movement, caused by the shift from nonviolent to radical activism, and argues that both novels advance Walker's concept of "womanism" by celebrating female solidarity, which helps their heroines resolve their marginalized position and overcome racial oppression and patriarchal constraints imposed on Black femininity.

Keywords: Alice Walker, *The Color Purple*, *Meridian*, Civil Rights Movement, women of color, double oppression, womanism, nonviolent vs. radical activism

Introduction

This paper seeks to portray the legacy of the Civil Rights movement in Alice Walker's novels *The Color Purple* (1982) and *Meridian* (1976). The first chapter addresses the historical overview, discussing the events prior to the Movement, the emergence of the Movement, and the major events that marked and determined its course. It also identifies certain historical figures that gave the Movement its meaning and contributed to its progress – Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King, Jr. In addition, it deals with the Black Feminist Movement, which emerged from the Civil Rights Movement as a response to some of its shortcomings, calling attention to the intersectionality between race and gender, the lack of Black women's rights within the Movement, and the immediate need for change. The chapter also defines Walker's concept of "womanism" and clarifies its meaning in relation to Black feminism.

The second part of the paper gives insight into the setting, context, and time reference of *The Color Purple*, combined with the examples of autobiographical elements incorporated in the novel. Additionally, it deals with the accompanying criticism that arose due to its controversial themes, such as rape, incest, and lesbianism. The chapter further identifies the dominant motifs in the novel, such as gender and racial inequality and the power of female mediums in triumphing over oppression.

The third part discusses Walker's earlier novel, *Meridian*, which did not achieve the commercial success of *The Color Purple*, yet is equally brilliant. It deals with Alice Walker's reflection on and the subsequent critique of the Civil Rights Movement in terms of Black women's rights and how it failed to acknowledge the racial and gender oppression women of color have sustained. The next chapter delves into the suppression of women's voices and its examples: "Marilene O' Shay," "The Wild Child," and "The Sojourner Tree," whereas the final chapter discusses the characterization of Meridian in terms of her activist engagement as well as the people and occurrences that played an important role in her personal growth.

1. A Historical Overview of the Civil Rights Movement

1.1. Prior to the Civil Rights Movement

> *All men are created equal and endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights*.
>
> – Preamble to the Declaration of Independence

Even though this most-quoted part of the Declaration of Independence promotes egalitarian values, in many ways, it was in stark contradiction with the reality of its time since in 1776, when the Declaration was adopted, America was known as a major slaveholding country with a well-established practice of slavery existing on its soil. Since the foundation of the U.S., the issue of slavery became subject to controversy and division in the country, which culminated in the Civil War in 1861. The Civil War had many causes, and one of the key ones was the national conflict over slavery. Today, it is known as one of the most significant conflicts in American history. The Union's victory in the Civil War resulted in the abolition and prohibition of slavery in the United States. As a result, millions of African Americans were freed from the chains of slavery.

The Civil War was followed by a more than a decade long period called the Reconstruction Era (1865–1877). During this time, many important events occurred, among others, the assassination of the former president Abraham Lincoln, who was succeeded by Andrew Johnson. The Reconstruction brought about many positive changes in every aspect of life:

> Schools for blacks [were] established and civil rights acts [were] passed. The South [was] divided into five military districts. African American politicians [were] elected for the first time ever in the South. Congress ratifie[d] the Fourteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution, granting citizenship, due process, and equal protection to former slaves. (Knight 366)

The Fourteenth Amendment granted African Americans equality, i.e., it stated that all people without exclusion must be subject to the same laws. With this positive modification, the position of African American people started improving. One positive change led to another, and the Fifteenth Amendment was passed shortly thereafter. It granted people of color voting rights, but these rights, unfortunately, did not extend to women and Native Americans at the

time. One might assume that African Americans finally succeeded in the acquisition of their rights; however, this was only ephemeral.

White supremacists were deeply affected by the defeat of the Confederates in the Civil War, and their discontent grew with the Reconstruction Era as greater freedom was granted to Black Americans. They neither accepted nor tolerated the extension of African Americans' civil rights, and once again, they decided to inhibit the progress of integrating Black Americans into American society. To succeed in their intention to completely exclude African Americans from the privileges of American citizenship and dominant power structures, they constructed a set of laws called the Jim Crow laws. The Jim Crow laws were designed and issued in the South immediately after the Reconstruction Era. The laws imposed the segregation of the highest level, with explicit measures to separate White and Black people, "[which] included the usage of public facilities in the South which were restricted to whites and blacks only signs" (Ollhoff 30). These laws were ratified by the predominantly White Democrats in the South. Regardless of the previously granted rights by the Fourteenth Amendment, African Americans were, once again, in a disadvantaged position. The Supreme Court had to find a way to justify such inconsistencies in the legality of their decisions, and it came up with a doctrine called "separate but equal," created under the pretext of equality. Yet, there was nothing equal in the segregated education; on the contrary, it was discriminatory, unethical, and, above all, it did not provide the same opportunities for African American and White citizens. It deprived people of color of the fundamental human rights from the earliest stages in life and consequentially of a better life afterwards.

Along with the implementation of Jim Crow laws, the dissatisfaction of White supremacists also manifested itself in the founding of the infamous Ku Klux Klan. The Ku Klux Klan was established in 1865 in Pulaski, Tennessee by a group of Confederates that advocated the supremacy of White Protestants and opposed the advancement of rights for African Americans. According to Wood, the Ku Klux Klan members perceived the Reconstruction Era as a way of "of disarm[ing] and disfranchis[ing] the Confederate white man, and [placing] the ignorant Negro, the rapacious carpetbagger, to rule and [dominate]" (262). Although the Ku Klux Klan did not act as a political party, they strongly favored the superiority of White people and isolationism. The Ku Klux Klan was formed as a threatening organization with the aim of disseminating hate and promoting violence against the people of color. They primarily targeted African Americans but did not channel their hate to persons of color only; they also encouraged anti-Semitism and directed their hate towards immigrants

and members of races that did not fit into their perverted vision of an acceptable society. Essentially, any individual who differed from them in terms of appearance, political affiliation, or attitudes was seen as a potential threat to the "ideal" American society. The Klansmen were deeply convinced that they had to preserve the so-called traditional values, which were none other than xenophobia and conservatism. At first, their primary goal was to intimidate Southern Blacks, which they achieved by wearing masks, which were, in absence of financial means, made from plain, white robes:

> These silent night riders, or walkers, of the Invisible Empire, were enveloped in long robes or gowns of various colors, and ample dimensions, which fully concealed the person. Some of them wore hideous masks, and some of them had false heads supported by a rod, which, when rested on the ground, placed the head in proper position. (Wood 264)

The reason for such an appearance was twofold; firstly, to avoid punishment by hiding their identity and secondly, to appear mysterious, which enabled them to psychologically terrorize Black people, who were highly credulous. The Klansmen "threatened the Negro with such awful portents and knew how to impress [and] utilize to the fullest extent his superstitious belief" (Wood 265). They did everything in their power to achieve their objective, i.e., impose terror on African American inhabitants. Unfortunately, the Klan started to gain influence outside of Pulaski borders, which resulted in a greater amount of its supporters, and a series of violent attacks ensued. The Klansmen were infamous for their nighttime raids, which often ended in the killings of numerous liberated slaves as well as White men who gave them support. The Klan's activity was marked by racism and excessive use of brutality. Eventually, it succeeded in briefly establishing White power during the 1870s. After that period, the Klan's influence started to subside until its revival in the early 1900s.

White supremacy after the Civil War was also maintained by the restriction of African Americans to low-wage labor. White landowners found a way to keep exploiting former slaves through the sharecropping system (Knight 210). Since they had no proper education, African Americans had no choice than to be sharecroppers. The South was limited to farming and crop production, which further deepened the already restricted job opportunities. Moreover, Black Americans were neither wanted nor needed in the North. In other words, their skin color hindered them from pursuing professional careers in the North as well as from owning land in the South. Sharecropping was thus the beginning of a vicious circle through

which "the old racial structure of White supremacy and black inferiority was maintained" (Knight 210), aggravating the struggle of African Americans in obtaining equal rights. Accordingly, despite various changing factors from which they were supposed to benefit, African Americans never truly enjoyed freedom in the Reconstruction Era because they were subordinated in terms of employment, education, and the usage of various facilities (Beittel 143).

America was founded as a land of equal opportunities for all people; yet, the misbalance that allowed the superiority of White people and subordination of people of color suggests otherwise. Beittel proposes that such unequal distribution of power "would be permissible in a society with a rigid class system, but it [was] out of place in a society dedicated to the implementation of democratic principles" (143). Racial injustice inflicted upon one group of people can have a devastating impact on a person while growing up. People of color were excluded from normal life and isolated from every social sphere, and the negative effects of such a restricted life culminated in behavioral issues. Beittel provides several examples of many harmful effects of the "separate but equal" doctrine, all of which include psychological issues exhibited by maladjusted individuals affected by the segregated society they live in, such as "feelings of frustration, the development of submissiveness . . . withdrawal tendencies, self-ambivalence, and distortion in the sense of reality" (144).

1.2. The Emergence of the Civil Rights Movement

The Civil Rights Movement was an ongoing struggle of African Americans that lasted for decades and aimed to end inequality and discrimination perpetuated by White supremacists towards people of color. Racism was not an uncommon issue throughout American history and had existed for centuries, dating back to the first English colonies in America. Even though slavery was legally abolished by the Thirteenth Amendment at the end of the Civil War, and the subsequent Fourteenth- and Fifteenth Amendment granted African Americans citizenship, equal treatment under the law, and the right to vote, Black Americans continued to suffer the effects of racist behavior in their lives and were denied the rights to which White people were privileged (see *Free at Last* 19, 57). The search for justice persisted for years, but it was not until the 1950s that it gained momentum and yielded notable success. The Civil Rights Movement is one the most important events that emerged in human history as it marked an immense transition in the attitudes of people of color, who were determined to put

an end to racist practices that they had endured for too long. The Civil Rights Movement marked a progression in relation to the former state of affairs, and from the 1950s until the late 1960s, "a brick wall of hatred, fear and ignorance started to come down" (Ollhoff 4).

According to Knight, the Civil Rights Movement can be divided in two phases – the early and the modern Civil Rights Movement (27). The early phase began in 1901 and lasted until 1955 and was marked by race riots in Texas, Georgia, and Illinois. In 1909, the NAACP or The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People was founded in New York, which was an important association dedicated to the improvement of African American lives (Knight 27). Considerable efforts were made to achieve progress, which analogously resulted in changes regarding the position of women in America. One of the most notable events to mark those changes was the birth of the first African American suffrage association by Ida B. Wells in Chicago in 1910, which stirred the historic turning point that occurred ten years later, when the Congress ratified the Nineteenth Amendment that granted all women the right to vote (Knight 27).

One cannot pinpoint the exact date that marked the beginning of the modern Civil Rights Movement; yet, many agree that it began with one simple and notable act of a woman named Rosa Parks, which instigated something that will later on be known as one of the most significant moments in human history. The 1950s were a time of segregation, which was visible in every aspect of African Americans' lives, and riding the buses was no exception. In fact, it was one of the most degrading experiences, and yet inevitable for the majority of Black Americans, considering that riding the bus was the only means of transport for many of them. Segregated bus laws demanded that White people be separated from the Black people, who were forced to sit in the back and give up their seat to White passengers if their section was full. On one particular occasion in 1955, in Montgomery, Alabama, a White person could not find a seat in a crowded bus, so Black people were forced by the driver to give up their seats. Among the passengers was Rosa Parks, who refused to give up her seat, which marked a historical breakthrough in the fight for the rights of African Americans resulting in the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement (Ollhoff 18). Her act of bravery was not welcomed by the authorities, nor was any similar act of civil disobedience. Consequently, Rosa Parks's action led to her arrest. Her act inspired many people to do the same and stand up against an unfair system. According to Bjornlund,

> Her single act of resistance sparked a boycott of city buses throughout the community—a boycott that lasted over a year and ended with the capitulation

> of the city. Because the majority of bus riders were African American, the boycott hurt the city economically. This type of nonviolent resistance to unfair laws and practices became a defining characteristic of the civil rights movement. (10)

There is no doubt that what Rosa Parks did instigated a series of events that generated an entire movement, but one tragic incident that occurred earlier the same year infuriated and shook the Black community. The latter was known as "a murder that rocked the nation," or the brutal killing of a fourteen-year old Black boy called Emmett Till, who allegedly whistled at a White woman, and a group of White men decided to punish him by beating him to death (Ollhoff 12). According to Bjornlund, "Till had broken unwritten rules against associating with a White person; those rules were supported by a legal system based on racist principles and practices" (14). Black Americans seemed to have developed the ability to withstand racist behavior, which mirrored itself in many ways, but such brutal and barbarous crime involving a child as a victim was especially gruesome; therefore, this "horrifying event gave racial injustice a human face, and pushed more people across the nation to demand civil rights" (Ollhoff 12). Sadly, the men responsible for the crime were never convicted on account of the fact that the decision was brought by a jury consisting of a dozen racist White men (Ollhoff 14).

The incident enraged many people and prompted them to join the movement and fight against racism. Dealing with discrimination in public transport was the onset of the Movement's activities, and soon various demonstrations took place. Restaurants were still segregated, and alterations had to be done. It was the university students who continued the protests and became the pillars of the revolution:

> In 1960, four black college students went to a "whites only" restaurant. The students, both black and white, took up space in [such] restaurants, hurting the businesses that refused to serve them. These protests became known as "sit-ins" and they became a popular and effective way to promote change. (Ollhoff 22)

Slowly, yet steadily, Jim Crow laws started losing effect, and segregation began perishing. Despite the 1956 Supreme Court's decision that found bus segregation in Montgomery, Alabama unconstitutional, in the 1960s, many Southern States disobeyed the ruling and refused to apply it in practice. That is when "freedom riders" emerged to call attention to

explicit non-compliance with federal regulations. They "stopped at places and tried to use facilities that were formerly marked as 'whites only' [and] were sometimes attacked by angry white mobs" (Ollhoff 22).

Even though countless, nameless activists took part in the battle against racial discrimination, there were a few who stood out as praiseworthy individuals that refused to accept the "status quo" and advocated freedom for Black Americans by acting on it in a nonviolent way (Hill 74). During the 1963 protests against segregation in Birmingham, Alabama, a man called Martin Luther King, Jr. arose as one the most prominent and memorable leaders in human history, who, together with some of his supporters, subsequently ended up in jail on account of his involvement in the civil rights struggle. He wrote the famous "Letter from Birmingham Jail" and stated that "injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere" (Ollhoff 26). A reverend by occupation, he advocated a pacifist philosophy devoid of violence and force as a means of achieving the movement's objectives. Explaining the reasons why King was the key figure of the movement and why he will always be remembered as an influential activist and leader, Ollhoff contends: "King combined his beliefs in God with his views on civil rights . . . his ideas continue to be an inspiration for people of all skin colors" (14). King's charisma and attitudes differentiated him from other leaders, which made him unique in that he respected people regardless of their race, religion, and inspired others to do so. He preached of positivity and peace and emphasized the latter as the primary means in the struggle against racism (Ollhoff 16). A few months later that same year, a protest called the March on Washington took place. The protest had a big turnout, with more than a quarter million people attending it. Had it not been for Martin Luther King Jr., who held the most famous and often quoted "I Have a Dream" speech, violence could have easily ensued due to the vast amount of people gathered at one place:

> King would deliver more than just another speech in support of equality for black Americans on that August day in 1963. His speech would be a defining moment for the movement, and his words would give new measure to the cause and inspire civil rights advocates to continue their cause. He spoke with the conviction of a minister of the gospel on racial harmony and mutual respect. (McNeese 17)

King intentionally decided to present his vision of a better future rather than emphasize the sufferings and discrimination Black Americans have sustained. He knew that such a speech

would provoke frustrations and encourage violent actions. Thus, every possible negative outcome was successfully evaded, whereas feelings of positivity and faith in a better future to come prevailed. King's efforts to end racism and improve Black people's lives were recognized a year later, in 1964, when he received the Nobel Peace Prize and became the youngest person to win such a prestigious award (Ollhoff 28). Although he acquired a lot of supporters during his decade-long leadership, he also gained opponents that did not share the same enthusiasm towards his peaceful ways of achieving racial equality. Throughout the following years, King continued to actively engage in protests, and one particular protest, in the spring of 1968, proved to be his last one: "On April 4, King was gunned down on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel. King's murder sparked a period of national mourning and a backlash of violence" (McNeese 134). Ironically, King's life ended in a violent way, and his death sparked the onset of even greater violence as riots following his assassination swept across the United States. Nevertheless, he embodied the positive change and contributed to the improvement of Black lives: "the Civil Rights Act of 1968 was passed just days after his assassination, [placing] a federal ban on discrimination in housing" (McNeese 134).

Thanks to remarkable individuals, such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Rosa Parks, the American society has come a long way and reformed its civil rights policies (Ollhoff 30). These historical figures influenced the nation with their vigor and genuine dedication to the cause. There were also numerous, nameless activists who sought justice for African Americans by means of diverse forms of activism implemented in everyday life in order to finally gain the rights every human being should possess upon birth. Despite the vast prevalence of racial discrimination in America and countless obstacles on the country's journey to freedom, by choosing activism over passivity, the movement succeeded in the elevation of rights and coming closer to ensuring equality for people of color.

1.3. The Black Feminist Movement and Womanism

The Civil Rights Movement aimed to eradicate racial discrimination, ensure equal opportunities, and improve the position of people of color in general. However, major faults arose in its journey towards freedom. The Movement failed to recognize women as equal and primarily emphasized Black men as victims of racial oppression, and by that, it neglected the racial and sexual oppression that Black women have sustained. One of the grave consequences of the disempowerment of Black men in the face of racial oppression was the

mistreatment of the weaker members of their community – African American women. As victims of both racism and domestic violence, women of color were inevitably doubly, if not triply, oppressed and forced into inferiority within a patriarchal and racially biased society. As a response to the invisibility and marginalization of Black women within the Women's Movement and the sexual oppression of Black women within the Civil Rights Movement the Black Feminist Movement was founded (Peterson). It celebrated two concepts – blackness and femininity (Peterson). The objective of the Black Feminist Movement was to address the issues of sexism and racism towards Black women and the need to abolish the double oppression that women of color had had to endure throughout history. The Black Feminist Movement asserted racial and gender equality as two overlapping phenomena that complement each other and are inseparable in the sense of equality (qtd. in Siddick 2019). As a Civil Rights activist and a woman of color, Alice Walker realized that the Civil Rights Movement "continued to oppress women and so failed in its mission of human liberation" (Warren 65). Walker contributed to the recognition of the double oppression of African American women through her works, such as *The Color Purple* (1982) and *Meridian* (1976), and accentuated the importance of equality for all people, male and female. Walker introduced the term "womanism" in her short story "Coming Apart," which has been associated with concepts such as femininity, race, and gender since its first appearance in 1979. According to Walker, the term "womanist" originates from the word "womanish" and is the opposite of girlish (*In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* 9). The term describes "a woman who loves other women, sexually or nonsexually," who "Loves music. Loves dance, Loves the moon, Loves the Spirit . . . Loves herself. *Regardless*" (Walker, *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* 9). According to Hendrickson, by using the word *womanist* as opposed to *feminist*, Walker "expresses her feeling of separation from white feminists who fail to consider race and feelings of exclusion, as a woman and a feminist, by black nationalist men" (113). However, it is important to note that Walker does not discriminate against men by using the word womanist, nor does she regard all White women as racial oppressors; on the contrary, she exposes her "commit[ment] to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female" (Duck 439) and highlights race and gender equality as an essential aftermath of a post-Civil-Rights-Movement-society.

2. Introduction to *The Color Purple*

The Color Purple is a renowned novel by Alice Walker written in epistolary form and published in 1982. The novel's narrative structure is nonlinear, based around a series of letters written by its main character, Celie, that lack date and "alternate between past or present focalization" (LaGrone 296). It is difficult to decipher the time span of the novel; yet, there are certain details that reveal crucial facts about it. At the beginning of the novel, during Celie's trip to the town with Albert, the townspeople ride in wagons, and by the end of the novel, the characters ride in cars. According to LaGrone, the difference in modes of transport indicates a time span of forty years (296). Celie addresses each letter to God, in whom she finds a friend to confide in that provides her with comfort and strength to carry on despite many burdens life throws at her. The letters, which abound with vernacular expressions of Black folk language, and are thus challenging to the reader and difficult to interpret, give authenticity to Celie, an impoverished, uneducated, African American girl who is "at the bottom of America's social caste" (LaGrone 13). Employing improper grammar, Walker deliberately emphasizes the importance of expressing raw, uncensored feelings that reflect the inner world of her protagonist, which provides insight into her state of mind, rather than accentuating the correct writing style. According to Jones,

> *The Color Purple* achieves its literary greatness through the aching intensity of Celie's lament; here, compressed into a series of short letters to God, is a story of renewal and triumph, one that transcends the constraints of history. We must view the historical context of the novel as no more or less than just that – a temporal and geographical setting for the larger, "universal" narrative. Alice Walker uses twentieth-century southern history as a vehicle for highlighting racial and gender oppression writ large. (669)

The novel is set in rural Georgia and depicts the difficult conditions women had to live in. Such circumstances were caused by a diversity of issues, all of which concerned the rights of women of color. The brilliance of Walker's novel lies in the fact that it deeply affects its readers and succeeds in getting the reader to sympathize with the characters, especially with Celie, on a sentimental level. By analyzing the realistic portrayals of the strong female characters, combined with the fact that Walker, like Celie, was born in Georgia, one cannot exclude the presence of biographical elements in the novel. On one occasion, even Walker

herself admitted that certain tragic events, such as the murder of her grandmother, inspired her to write about the cruelty that some women experienced, as well as slavery and violence that happened long before she was born ("The Color Purple" 0:25-0:40). The significance of the novel in terms of female empowerment and womanhood is indisputable and was officially recognized in 1983, when it received the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. The empowering themes of love, humanity, and women's bonds achieved popularity among readers and, consequently, put the novel in the limelight, making it an overnight success and Walker the first African American woman to receive such an honor (Harris 56). Due to the novel's increasing popularity, one of Hollywood's most famous directors, Steven Spielberg, decided to make its movie adaptation. Walker questioned the idea: "She had significant misgivings and felt that a white, male director could not understand or translate her work effectively" (Donnelly 101). Walker eventually gave in, and Spielberg directed *The Color Purple* three years later in collaboration with Quincy Jones as the music producer. The film, whose cast included popular names such as Oprah Winfrey, Whoopi Goldberg, and Danny Glover, became an instant hit. Despite the fact that *The Color Purple* was well received and acclaimed, it also elicited controversy. The controversy primarily stemmed from debatable topics present throughout the novel – abuse, brutality, graphic language, and the supposed exaggerated negative portrayal of Black men:

> Many African American literary critics harshly charged Walker with uncovering an intracommunal issue, "airing dirty laundry," and unjustly calling attention to domestic violence and sexist brutality. The book was charged with igniting tensions between African American men and African American women and striking a loud chord within the hearts of African American women who shared memories of having suffered abuse at the hands of black men. (Harris 124)

One of Walker's harshest critics, Ishmael Reed, accused her for "being in the league with white feminists, who have systematically conspired to denigrate black men" and devoid them from redemption (qtd. in Lister 124). According to those critics, the movie simply reaffirmed their former beliefs. It is interesting to note that *The Color Purple* was found offensive not only by Black men but also by certain female reviewers who exposed their antipathy towards the novel. Pauline Kael, for example, accuses Walker of "rampant female chauvinism" (qtd. in Lister 123). Other negative reviews exposed the novel as a revival of stereotypes about Black men and women being in a cyclical dominant-submissive relationship and "joined in

faulting the novel for giving validity to all the white racist's notions of pathology in black communities" (Kaplan 124). Despite the fact that some, mostly Black men, found it too explicit and considered it inaccurate, the novel received praise due to its realistic portrayal of Black women's position at the time it is set. According to Lister, Walker's supporters defend the main idea that the novel revolves around women and not men and that it provides the male characters a chance to change their lives by changing their disposition (125):

> *The Color Purple* is not a story about black men; it is a story about black women. Walker chose a particular feminist theme, and dealt with it which resulted in many black men protesting and licking their wounded egos. All too often, it is with such dispatch that black men come to the defense of their egos that they fail to realize that they are not the issue at hand. (Lister 125)

Having been criticized for uttering the truth about Black women's hardship, Walker expressed her disappointment regarding the fact that African American communities were not willing to admit the injustices inflicted upon African descended women that occurred in their own communities (qtd. in Harris 124). On one occasion, she exposed the truth behind it, i.e., she "let out a secret," a secret of abuse and violence, and spoke on behalf of the women who had kept quiet about it for too long (qtd. in Harris 124).

2.1. Women in the Cycle of Oppression

Black female characters represented in *The Color Purple* are victims of a society that is sexist and discriminatory on every level. It is a society in which men have the leading role, while women's voices and needs are never taken into account. Walker illustrates the dysfunctional relationship between Black men and women, where Black men, who are racially discriminated and subordinated in the White-supremacist society, express their frustrations in the form of abusive behavior towards Black women. Walker depicts a cycle of oppression in which women, as the weaker sex, suffer maltreatment at the hands of men, who are unable to oppose social injustice and instead direct their anger towards the members of their own community. Walker accomplished to reveal the truth about the sufferings of women of color in the first half of the twentieth century, which is also due to the fact that she herself witnessed real-life experiences of women's confinement in a violent and male-dominated environment: "Ever since I was a child, I had been aware of the high rate of domestic violence in our town; wives shot or stabbed to death, children sometimes abused and beaten" (qtd. in

Plant 111). Black women's inferiority to Black men in the novel is revealed through their objectification and sexual exploitation. The dominant and recurrent motif in the novel is the gender inequality that stems from racial oppression, and Walker was one of the "first contemporary women writers to insist that sexism existed in Black communities and was not only an issue for white women" (Johnson 21). Various forms of oppression manifest themselves explicitly throughout the novel, from the very beginning, through the portrayal of Celie's life and many other women characters who experience mistreatment and are constantly belittled and demeaned simply because they are Black women.

The protagonist, Celie, lives a life dictated by men and is a victim of a racist and patriarchal society. Celie is a girl of only fourteen years and is already dealing with physical and psychological abuse in her life. Her stepfather, Alphonso, takes sexual advantage of her because his wife's illness prevents her from performing marital duties:

> Just say You gonna do what your mammy wouldn't. First he put his thing up gainst my hip and sort of wiggle it around. Then he grab hold my titties. Then he push his thing inside my pussy. When that hurt, I cry. He start to choke me, saying You better shut up and git used to it. But I don't never get used to it. And now I feels sick every time I be the one to cook. (Walker, *The Color Purple* 8)

With this graphic description, filled with vulgarity and clearly indicating pedophilia, Walker paints a picture of Celie's utter anguish and a complete disregard of her feelings. In order to satisfy his animal needs, Fonso fails to take into account that Celie is underage and continues raping her, which results in her giving birth to two of his children. As if physical torment were not enough, Alphonso takes Celie's children away from her, leaving her in ignorance and contemplating possible outcomes: "He took my other little baby, a boy this time. But I don't think he kilt it. I think he sold it to a man an his wife over in Monticello. I got breasts full of milk running down myself. He say Why don't you look decent? Put on something. But what I'm sposed to put on. I don't have nothing" (Walker, *The Color Purple* 10). Hopeless and with nobody to confide in, Celie writes letters in which she confesses everything that Alphonso does to her, and she writes them to God because Fonso threatens her not to reveal her sufferings to anyone besides God: "You better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy" (Walker, *The Color Purple* 8). Celie does not understand what is happening to her and asks God for advice instead of sharing her sorrows with her younger sister, Nettie.

Due to her young age, she cannot comprehend that it is not her fault that she is molested. According to Donnelly, Celie "is questioning her own status as a moral person" and feels "that she is no longer good . . . responsible for the wrongs done to her" (82). Alphonso's destructive behavior shatters her world apart causing her to be emotionally traumatized and physically bruised. Accordingly, Celie's childhood is far from that of a normal teenager. Her spirit is broken to the point that she sees death as a positive alternative to living: "If I was buried I wouldn't have to work" (Walker, *The Color Purple* 19). Every source of negativity Celie faces prompts her to keep silent about her miseries. Walker applies the metaphor of a tree to both emphasize Celie's passive behavior and to signify her strength to deal with the abuse. Just as a tree withstands stormy weather without breaking, Celie manages to stay sane despite all odds. Her passivity and attempt "to ignore and to annihilate her body" (Bloom 13) are thus coping mechanisms and her way of surviving her difficulties: "It all I can do not to cry. I make myself wood. I say to myself, Celie, you a tree. That's how come I know trees fear man" (Walker, *The Color Purple* 30).

According to Harris, Walker's portrayal of Celie's hardship and abuse "expose[s] the reality of sexual brutality in Black communities [and] points out the problematic nature of how deeply entrenched sexist and patriarchal ideas operate in black communities among black women and black men, thus reinforcing an ignorance and a silencing of black women's experiences and voices" (*The Color Purple* 92). Throughout the first chapters of the novel, Celie is constantly devalued and diminished, and after Alphonso's maltreatment, she is forcefully given to Mister, i.e., Albert. Like her slave ancestors, she is put up for auction, inspected like a piece of meat, and transferred from one master to another. Walker succeeded in illustrating the absurdity of the bargain between Fonso and Albert, in which a cow played a crucial role. Mister initially wanted to marry Nettie, but Fonso refused his proposal and offered the less attractive but hardworking Celie, who was older and owned a cow, which persuaded Mister to accept Fonso's offer. Unfortunately, Celie's miseries do not end with a new husband; on the contrary, Albert maltreats Celie the same way Alphonso did because, like Fonso, he sees her merely as a sexual object and servant. Furthermore, Celie is obligated to take care of Albert's children and has to endure beatings and degradation on a daily basis. Albert beats Celie to lower her self-esteem and weaken her dignity, in order to maintain her compliancy and submissiveness, as well as to boost his miniscule masculinity. Walker depicts Alberts's convenient way of justifying his actions by stating that Celie is his wife, as if that automatically marked Celie as his slave: "Harpo ast his daddy why he beat me. Mr._____

say, Cause he my wife. Plus, she stubborn. All women good for—he don't finish. Remind me of Pa" (Walker, *The Color Purple* 22).

Celie's experience shows that being an African American woman in the early 1900s was not easy as, in addition to numerous forms of gender oppression, African American women had to deal with racial prejudice as well. Owing to the fact that women of color, often underprivileged, had little or no rights, they were limited in their choice of lifestyle, which was often reduced to performing domestic duties, i.e., taking care of the household and children, doing physical labor, and mostly fulfilling their husbands' wishes. Both Celie and Albert's son, Harpo, serve as objects of this patriarchal system and even become accustomed to Albert's sexist behavior to the point that they stop seeing it as something unusual and wrong and perceive it as ordinary and accepted. According to Henderson, Celie's disempowerment is evident from the fact that she internalizes "the principle of male dominance" (25), which becomes obvious when she suggests that Harpo beat his wife, Sofia, to make her obedient. Sofia is an atypical character who differs from Celie in many ways, especially regarding her demeanor and attitudes towards traditional gender roles. She is neither subdued nor obedient and does not display any of the conventional features assigned to a woman of that time. Sofia's behavior is at first unacceptable to Harpo, who, although he "secretly enjoys doing women's work," does not allow the reversal of male-female roles imposed by society (Johnson 47). Incited by Celie's advice and his father's example, he attempts to make Sofia submissive by beating her. Albert reinforces his pattern of behavior by giving Harpo an atrocious advice: "You have to let 'em know who got the upper hand. Nothing can do that better than a good sound beating" (Walker, *The Color Purple* 34). However, Harpo soon realizes that Sofia's constitution poses a threat to both his attempts to follow in his father's footsteps and to his own masculinity since he can never beat her without getting hurt. His final attempt to physically overpower Sofia by gaining weight to appear more intimidating in order to control her backfires, as well, as it results in him being laughed at and mocked for his newly-acquired appearance: "He still skinny, bout half Sofia size, but I see a little pot beginning under his overalls. . . . No matter what they say or do, Harpo eat through it. Food on his mind morning, noon and night. His belly grow and grow, but the rest of him don't. He begin to look like he big. When it due? us ast" (Walker, *The Color Purple* 42). Numerous challenges in his relationship with Sofia eventually bring Harpo to reason, and he reconciles with her. He comes to terms with staying at home, while his wife is "clerking in the store Celie has inherited from her real father" (Johnson 47).

The conflict between Sofia and Harpo thus serves as an effective critique of gender inequality in African American communities, but it is also an impetus to Celie's resistance and growth. Celie's suggestion that Harpo should beat Sofia into subservience at first seems strange and unfathomable to the reader, who might assume that Celie should know better than perpetuate the cycle of abuse and mistreatment she herself is a victim of. At first, Celie is subconsciously envious of Sofia as she represents everything Celie wants to be. She is strong, independent and unafraid to express what is on her mind, and, most importantly, she never tolerates any form of subjugation (Henderson 25). She is adamant not to acquiesce to other people's expectations of womanly behavior, and that amazes Celie. However, Celie soon gets torn by guilt, which manifests itself in the form of her insomnia. She quickly realizes the wrongness of her action and regrets the advice she gave Harpo, and she and Sofia soon reconcile. In a conversation with Sofia, Celie recognizes the importance of standing up for yourself, especially when you are a woman, once again emphasizing the underprivileged position of women in African American communities: "I had to fight my daddy. I had to fight my brothers. I had to fight my cousins and my uncles. A girl child ain't safe in a family of men" (Walker, The *Color Purple* 38). When Harpo once again turns to Celie for advice, this time Celie offers a different solution; she dissuades him from beating Sofia and advises that he start cherishing her and the relationship they have. Bearing in mind that Harpo grew up with Albert and that Albert grew up with a "tyrannical father," it seems that Walker's characters cannot be portrayed as "antagonists [and] purely one-sided evil beings; [beacuse] those who bring about violence are usually victims themselves of some form of abuse" (Abood and Dhain 467). Conclusively, they cannot be the sole culprits for what they have become because they have been shaped by external factors, i.e., by the patriarchal and racially discriminating society in which they were brought up.

2.2. Racism

Racism is another omnipresent discriminative practice in *The Color Purple* reflected through Celie's character, whose dark skin exposes her to even greater inequity. The novel's time frame concurs with the Jim Crow laws period. Celie's skin color and her gender mark her double oppression as she is considered inferior and worthless in the eyes of both Black and White male characters. Since she has never had a chance to enjoy justice in a society that valued people based on their race, appearance, social status, sexual orientation, and gender,

owing to the fact that she exhibited the opposite of every desirable trait by being ugly, Black, female, dark-skinned, bisexual, and uneducated (LaGrone 13), Celie's life is reduced to the lowest level: "You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman. Goddam, he say, you nothing at all" (Walker, *The Color Purple* 102). Because she is dark-skinned, Mister often points out that she is ugly and black as if that "at the same time stripped [her] of femininity and sexual allure" (Murguía 113). Owing to the fact that Celie was subjected to racism and previously mentioned sexism, she is unobtrusive and voiceless. The only way she can articulate her voice and, by extension, her identity is through her epistolary confessions to God. Celie's letters expose her painful experience of deeply rooted racism. Celie depicts God as a man who is "big and old and tall and graybearded and white, he wear white robes and go bare footed. Blue eyes? she ast. Sort of bluish-gray" (Walker, *The Color Purple* 97). Her notion of God does not surprise since she has been accustomed to racist behavior, and it has become part and parcel of her life. As Altaher maintains, Celie's concept of "God, angels, or Jesus Christ as a white man [proves] that the Black community is still struggling with the notion of hierarchal race" (5). Celie's concept of God as a White man serves as an example of internalized racism, which occurs when a victim of oppression starts believing in his/her inferior status. According to Henderson, "Celie accepts the theology of self-denial. It is a theology that validates her inferior status and treatment as a Black woman in a racist and sexist culture" (26). Celie changes her vision of God with the help of Shug Avery, Albert's mistress, whom she befriends and who plays a crucial role in the emotional and spiritual aspect of Celie's life. Shug encourages Celie to rethink and modify her "scriptural notions of divinity within the scheme of patriarchy" (Henderson 28). She aids Celie in realizing that God is all around us and is not limited to a certain race but can be found in oneself: "God is inside you and inside everybody else. You come into the world with God. But only them that search for it inside find it. And sometimes it just manifest itself even if you not looking, or don't know what you looking for. I believe God is everything. . . . Everything that is or ever was or ever will be" (Walker, *The Color Purple* 98).

Celie is not the only character to experience injustice and racial inequality; later in the novel the reader learns about the fate of Celie's biological father, who fell victim to Jim Crow laws. Celie's father is a successful store owner, whose lucrative business and growing economic power bother the White owners whose businesses are negatively affected by his success. The White merchants complain about their competition for a while and decide to take matters in their own hands. They take drastic measures and destroy her father's store by

burning it and drag the man and his two brothers out of their homes and lynch them (Walker, *The Color Purple* 90). This instance vividly portrays the cruelty Black people had to deal with in the first half of the twentieth century if they were ambitious, successful entrepreneurs. White radicals terrorized innocent Black people who possessed property and forced them to respect their rules. They had two options, to obey their rules, i.e., stop working, or suffer fatal repercussions. Racist White men did not tolerate competition, and the Jim Crow legislation allowed them to enforce radical measures of choice involving not only intimidation but also the murdering of Black people. Influential people of color were perceived as a threat to White men's businesses and the well-established hierarchy of White power. Thus, African Americans were condemned to poverty and had to suffer the consequences of an unjust system (Altaher 7). Racism continues to be a prevalent motif throughout the novel, and it is once again materialized through Harpo's wife, Sofia. When Sofia and her children catch the attention of the mayor's wife, Millie, Millie commends Sofia for cleanliness and proposes that she work as a maid at her home. Sofia, being too proud to accept the offer and too impudent for her own good, answers with a "hell no" (Walker, *The Color Purple* 53). Later, she reveals that she did what she had to do to save her dignity and did not care about the consequences (Altaher 7). Sofia's determination to stand behind her principles and risk her existence by defying influential White persons, such as the mayor and his wife, is praiseworthy. Yet, it subsequently gets her in trouble. Because of her bold defiance and refusal to become the White woman's maid, she is physically attacked by the law enforcement: "They crack her skull, they crack her ribs. They tear her nose loose on one side. They blind her in one eye" (Walker, *The Color Purple* 53). In addition, in order to evade incarceration, she has to work as a maid in the mayor's residence, which she loathes from the very beginning. Sofia ends up working there for years in inhumane slave-like conditions:

> They got me in a little storeroom up under the house, hardly bigger than Odessa's porch, and just about as warm in the winter time. I'm at they beck and call all night and all day. They won't let me see my children. They won't let me see no mens. Well, after five years they let me see you once a year. I'm a slave, she say. What would you call it? (Walker, *The Color Purple* 61)

According to Bloom, "Sofia becomes a victim of social injustice when she refuses to respect authority, [and exposes] the dangers of fighting back, since her punishment is hardly "just" or merited" (72). In other words, she proves how badly Black people were treated and that powerful White people had tremendous influence and unlimited freedom to do whatever they

pleased. Double standards applied as a rule without exception. Sofia is severely punished for her audacity and sharp tongue, whereas the mayor, who physically attacks her by hitting her on the face, suffers no consequence. Furthermore, Miss Millie denigrates Sofia by offering her a job to work as a servant for her family. In that way she deliberately classifies her as not being worthy of a better job opportunity, assuming that she should be happy with her offer. Although Sofia and her children appear decent and clean, they are marked by their African American descent and approached by the superior White people in a condescending manner. Sofia realizes that for her to subsist, she has to suppress her identity and "mask her own natural aggression and pretend instead to be the meek and submissive Miss Celie" (Johnson 47).

2.3. The Power of Female Solidarity in Overcoming Obstacles

When the reader is acquainted with Celie, she is dependent on men that have a dominant role in her life and is determined by society, which forms her way of thinking, reinforcing her status as an unimportant, girl of color condemned to a segregated and burdensome life. She is victimized, has no self-esteem, and initially does nothing to change her current position. Her life begins to change once she finds strength to rebel with the help of various female characters who play an essential role in overcoming her obstacles and embracing life (Plant 97). Celie, as well as the other women in the novel, would not have achieved their goals if it were not for the mutual support they gave each other. Celie's path to happiness is strenuous, and through her portrayal, Walker puts a great emphasis on female relationships and the role of female solidarity in women's liberation from racial and patriarchal chains: "[Celie] begins to find an identity through a network of female relationships [and] is [thus] able to break free from the masculine prohibition against speech and to join a community of women, thus freeing herself from dependence on and subjection to male brutality" (Bloom 15).

Shug Avery is one of the characters that change Celie's life for better in many ways. She is the antithesis of Celie, i.e., she is lighter-skinned and portrayed as an attractive, hyper-sexualized woman, a source of Albert's consummate longing. Nevertheless, Celie feels a strong fascination towards Shug, who embodies a strong Black female and has her life and men in control. Shug's nonconforming demeanor in terms of promiscuity and a progressive dress style makes her unpopular in the female community; yet, Celie is drawn to her image: "Shug Avery was a woman. The most beautiful woman I ever saw. She more pretty then my

mama. She bout ten thousand times more prettier then me" (Walker, *The Color Purple* 13). Shug is the one who opens a new chapter of Celie's life, although their first meeting is not pleasant. At first, she acts in a conceited and arrogant manner while talking to Celie: "She look me over from head to foot. Then she cackle. Sound like a death rattle. You sure is ugly, she say, like she ain't believed it" (Walker, *The Color Purple* 33). However, their relationship changes due to Shug's illness. Celie's compassion and kindness become evident when she takes care of Shug during her recovery, proving that she does not resent Shug and acts as a friend despite her unfavorable first impression. Celie is enticed by Shug and remains uncertain whether the feeling is mutual, since she is Albert's mistress, which effectively puts her in a complicated love triangle: "Before I know it, tears meet under my chin. And I'm confuse. He love looking at Shug. I love looking at Shug. But Shug don't love looking but at one of us. Him" (Walker, *The Color Purple* 47). Eventually, Shug succeeds in making Celie happy by singing "Miss Celie's song." Her act seems trivial to the reader, but to Celie it is the first time someone regards her as a human being capable of being noticed and loved. The relationship between the two women evolves into a sexual one not long thereafter:

> Surprisingly, Shug says that she loves Celie and kisses her. At first Celie is surprised, but she kisses Shug back. They do this until they end up sleeping in each other's arms. It's clear that Shug is the reason as to why Celie becomes self-aware of her physique. Celie actually admits that she never enjoyed sex since she had been used by men to satisfy their interests rather than having mutual pleasure. (Mohammed 121)

Walker introduces lesbianism as a part of "Celie's broader awakening of consciousness and self-confidence" (Donnelly 101). Her relationship with Shug enables her sexual and spiritual development as it is based on friendship and mutual respect. Prior to meeting Shug, Celie has engaged in intercourse, but never experiencing pleasure, which in Shug's terms implies her virgin status: "Why Miss Celie, she say, you still a virgin" (Walker, *The Color Purple* 49). Only after experimenting with homosexuality did she embrace her sexuality and start to enjoy physical contact. It is no wonder that homosexuality fulfills Celie since every man whom she has come in contact with has either abused or treated her with disrespect. Even to this day, Mohammed contends, "homosexuality is considered abnormal [due to] social and cultural ideology fostered by the society" (121). For that reason, Walker introduces homosexuality among Black women not as a phenomenon to be criticized but instead emphasizes its natural and positive connotation that helps Celie emancipate and embrace her Black beauty. With

Shug's help, Celie realizes that sexual intercourse can be fulfilling and liberating for a woman as well, which alters her sense of self and builds her self-esteem. From a despised being she transforms into a person worthy of pride and confidence.

Celie and Nettie's relationship is equally strong and loving. Having been fatherless and with a feeble mother who suffered the consequences of her husband's tragedy, the two had only each other to count on. Regardless of Celie's age, Nettie functions as the wiser kin, in terms of "instill[ing] a degree of confidence" and emphasizing the importance of standing up for oneself (Mark 6). She intervenes when Mr. _____'s children "ride roughshod over her" and warns: "Don't let them run over you. . . . You've got to fight" (qtd. in Kaplan 127). The truth about Nettie is disclosed after many years. As with everything in the onset of Celie's life, her sole source of love is taken away from her when she is separated from her sister by Albert's selfish desires towards Nettie as she refuses to give in to his "amorous intentions" (Donnelly 74). Celie feared for Nettie's wellbeing and suspected that she would have to face the same ill-treatment. For that reason, Celie urged her to go "to the minister and his wife, the only woman I ever seen with money" to prevent her from suffering the same fate as herself (qtd. in Donnelly 18). Nettie acquiesces to her wish and promises to maintain contact, a promise that was fulfilled, and thanks to Shug's intervention, subsequently discovered. Prompted by recent revelations, Celie starts writing back to Nettie. The sisters finally establish contact and prove that Albert's malicious interference could not separate the bond of sisterhood, which, in spite of their distance, overcame every hardship. According to Henderson, Celie's identity is rediscovered, and symbolically, her writing becomes improved after her discovery of Nettie's letters. She not only stops addressing her letters to God but she also writes longer, more eloquent letters that "attest to the power of literacy [and] reinforce the motif of community and female bonding that underlie the novel" (28).

From an incompetent and helpless girl, Celie transforms into a woman who achieves independence and manages to succeed in life by pursuing a career of her own and surrounding herself with loving and caring people. She resolves to leave Albert and finds courage to defy him despite his vicious remarks on her leaving: "I'm pore, I'm black, I may be ugly and can't cook. . . . But I'm here!" (Walker, *The Color Purple* 102). For the first time, Celie forms a voice of her own and proves that she is worthy of a better life, and thus will no longer tolerate Albert's mistreatment. Whereas her relationship with Shug is both educational and loving in that it inspires her to broaden her horizons and gain a new perspective on life, the discovery of Nettie's letters, which enrages her, encourages her to assume control over her very existence.

Shug encourages Celie to make a living from her hobby of sewing pants and provides her with financial means to start her own business, which she names Folkspants, Unlimited. As a traditionally male garment, pants symbolize Celie's emancipation from patriarchal oppression, which she achieves through female solidarity. Celie's entrepreneurship represents a creative outlet that enables her to achieve financial independence and self-sufficiency, and eventually, it becomes "her means of escaping Albert's domination" (Bloom 177). Regardless of many adversities that have befallen her, Celie ultimately manages to free herself and modify her life. The subordination she was forced to sustain for such a long time finally ends when she takes control over her life by liberating herself from the influence of the controlling, manipulating men. In other words, Walker portrays "black women as capable of being independent and of supporting themselves outside of any viable connection with men," thus triumphing over oppression (Harris 92). After years of physical and emotional sufferings that marked the majority of her teenage and adult years, Walker provides a happy ending; with Celie and her loved ones reunited in personal and communal wholeness (Mark 8): "By the end of the novel, then, all parts of Celie's life have converged to form a coherent, if fantastic, whole. Her business [blossoms], she and Nettie inherit their father's store and house, she enjoys the love of Shug and the respect of Mister, and she celebrates a tearful reunion with her sister and children" (Jones 664). Despite their age, Celie declares: "And us so happy. Matter of fact, I think this the youngest us ever felt," proving that it is never too late to transform one's life and attain happiness (Walker, *The Color Purple* 131). Accordingly, through the motif of female solidarity Walker sets forth her notion of "womanism," asserting the importance of love as a driving force in women's journey towards emancipation and prevailing gender and racial obstacles.

3. Alice Walker's Reflection in *Meridian*

Meridian is a novel written by Alice Walker that was published in 1976, preceding her eminent and highly praised novel *The Color Purple* (1982). The novel represents Walker's personal reflection on the Civil Rights Movement, its social impact, and the shifting attitudes in the tumultuous times following its peak. There are many ways in which *Meridian* can be analyzed in terms of social, political, and philosophical issues that continue to engage us to this day (Hendrickson 112). Owing to the fact that Walker was actively involved in the Movement, the novel is also known as her "meditation on the Civil Rights movement" and is recognized for the sincerity in delving into "the questions of violence, sexual roles and the complexity of interracial situations" (Quinn 80). The importance of the novel arises from its innate capacity to capture the spirit of times, owing to the fact that "Alice Walker is the only major African American woman writer who came of age during the Civil Rights Movement and participated in it" (Hendrickson 112).

As in *The Color Purple*, there is considerable correlation concerning the author's and the main character's life. Walker herself admitted that *Meridian* is autobiographical as the protagonist's experience and "what she does in her 'sane madness' – her psychological suffering – parallel some of [her own] psychological suffering" (qtd. in Hull et al. 301). Yet, Walker claims that her main character, Meridian, is an "exemplary, flawed revolutionary . . . [and] entirely a better person than [herself]" (Byrd 112). By describing her as "flawed," she implies that Meridian, like the "revolutionary people," is not "less worthy, but more worthy of following" and that by having flaws, they both exhibit ordinary characteristics and function as extraordinary individuals possessing superior strength to fight for their cause (Byrd 112). Certain elements in Meridian's life mirror Walker's young adult life, especially the years during her college education. Like Meridian, Walker received a scholarship "provided by wealthy white Northern sympathizers" (Lauret 60). Furthermore, she also worked at the voter registration and was actively engaged in the Movement by partaking in the demonstrations and marches (qtd. in Hendrickson 111). Another autobiographical element is the novel's setting – the rural South, Georgia, where Walker was born, and which is in *Meridian* the fictional town called Chicokema. Walker was inspired by Martin Luther King's 1963 speech delivered at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, in which he urged civil rights workers to "go back to Mississippi . . . go back to Georgia" (qtd. in Hendrickson 111). In like manner, the protagonist of the novel "returns to the South to live with poor blacks" (Stein 138) after

she was excluded from the group of student activists at her college because she refused to engage in radical forms of activism. She moves to the South in order to identify with local Black people and fathom the difficulties that have become an integral part of their lives. By "remaining close to the people—to see them, to be with them, [she gets to] understand them and herself" (Walker, *Meridian* 25).

Like in *The Color Purple*, in *Meridian*, Walker resorts to the usage of nonlinear narrative structure that shifts from the present to the past. The beginning of the novel is set in the 1970s, years after the Movement's peak, when Meridian returns to Chicokema. The narrative then goes back to the years during Meridian's activism in New York; then it flashes back to her early life (Quinn 80). The structure of *Meridian* is defined by Walker as a "crazy quilt" since it jumps "back and forth in time . . . focusing similar experiences and issues through different temporal lenses" (qtd. in Dubey 136). Walker describes the form of the quilt and its irregular structure as her means of fueling creativity, which enables her to be free while creating her works (Byrd 101).

3.1. The Critique of the Movement

According to Walker, the Civil Rights Movement "led to knowledge, hope, and possibility for American blacks" (qtd. in Stein 129). The Movement changed the course of history and facilitated the slow acquisition of rights of people of color. As mentioned in the first chapter of this paper, the Movement exhibited many flaws in terms of Black women's rights but also in terms of activist methods, as radical activism replaced the nonviolent approaches that were advocated in its initial struggles. Besides the marginalization of Black women within the Movement, Walker also drew attention to its divergent perspectives and accompanying changing practices. During the late 1960s, the Movement was no longer utilizing pacifist methods in its battle against racism; rather, it became increasingly violent, which is rendered through Meridian's eyes when she refuses to be a part of radical activist behavior that includes bloodshed. Through Meridian's negative sentiment towards killing and by reiterating the Movement's peaceful ways, "Walker mourns the deaths of those who died so bloodily during the Civil Rights Movement and the death of a beautiful dream, a dream of freedom, equality and nonviolence" (Hendrickson 114). Yet, the sudden transition of the Movement's character from nonviolent to violent did not appear without cause. According to Hendrickson, "despite the Movement, in 1970 the United States continued to be racially divided and

violent," and African Americans continued to withstand brutality (112). This is reflected in the novel in a conversation between Truman and the sweeper, who utters: "I seen rights come and I seen 'em go" (Walker, *Meridian* 13), suggesting the deceiving nature of social and political change. Many years of torture and violence inflicted upon people of color incited activists to retaliate, i.e., respond in accordance with the way they were treated. The case of a young black woman who began to "question everything she had ever believed in," declaring that "nonviolence is through" (qtd. in Hendrickson 112), epitomizes the state of mind of an average activist at the time. Walker highlights violence as one of the Movement's major flaws and reiterates the importance of pacifism by rendering it as a genuine activist behavior. Meridian is the only one from the group of students who chooses nonviolence and the only one who remains truly dedicated to achieving equality, even after the Movement ceased to exist.

4. The Suppression of Female Voices in *Meridian*

4.1. The True Story of Marilene O'Shay

The first instance in the novel that exposes the suppression of women's voice is the case of Marilene O'Shay, whose corpse is publicly exhibited for the crowd to observe. Marilene's story supports the notion of women being exposed to brutality and violence and the absurdity of racial paradigms. She is displayed in a circus wagon, and her remains are revealed by her husband, Henry O'Shay, who murdered her "cause this bitch was doing him wrong, and that ain't right!" (Walker, *Meridian* 16). According to Hansen, in order to lure paying viewers and divulge her "emblematic fate," eight words are written on the wagon recounting of Marilene: "Obedient Daughter," "Devoted Wife," "Adoring Mother," and "Gone Wrong" (75). Marilene represents an ideal woman, a "goddess" who has everything in life – a washing machine, furs, and a fulltime house-keeper cook (Walker, *Meridian* 14). Yet, although she has everything, she goes "outside the home to seek her pleasuring" (Walker, *Meridian* 14). Because of her unfaithfulness, her husband brutally strangles her. Henry O'Shay symbolically chooses strangulation as a way of killing his wife to prevent her voice from ever being heard: "Although Henry O'Shay shoots the man who cuckolds him, he does not turn the gun on his wife, choosing instead to strangle her with his own hands. In so doing, he dislodges her tongue and prevents her from speaking out while she dies" (Pifer 6). It is not coincidental that particularly these eight words are written on the wagon that houses Marilene's corpse since they, with the exclusion of "Gone Wrong," make up the formula for the prescribed woman's behavior and her fundamental purpose in life – to bear children and be a loving wife. Besides the clear connotation of the radical corporal punishment of a woman for her infidelity, this episode reveals another underlying motif, that of racial difference. Marilene's husband is determined to preserve the image of his wife's White race and combs her hair religiously to keep it straight. Yet, even though her straight, reddish hair is a symbol of her White race, her body, darkened by bruises, represents the deterioration caused by her infidelity which leads people to think that she is a woman of African American descent, even though her husband explains to the viewers that her darkened body is a result of exposure to salt from the Great Salt Lake, where he threw her after killing her (Hansen 75). Walker's rendition of the story of Marilene O'Shay symbolically exposes deeply ingrained racism. Marilene represents an ideal woman who is White, but "goes wrong," and her body darkens, resembling that of a woman

of color, which renders her sinful. Besides being a clear example of racial discrimination, the story of Marilene O'Shay also serves as a universal emblem of society's vision of an ideal woman and women's traditional roles. It also exposes the consequences that women suffer when they abandon social norms in a patriarchal society. Marilene represents a "profitable commercial spectacle," and her body mirrors society whose racial and gender oppression cause physical and mental deterioration (Dubey 127).

4.2. The Wild Child

Walker dedicated a small portion of *Meridian* to the story of a homeless thirteen-year-old girl called "Wile Chile, as the people in the neighborhood called her (saying it slowly, musically, so that it became a kind of lewd, suggestive song" (Walker, *Meridian* 28). Wile Chile lives in the slums around Saxon College and "cannot be accommodated within the community, because of her cursing, her dirt and manners" (Wisker 99). She is an "abandoned girl living almost ferally out of trash cans" (Barnett 84). Because she is socially insignificant, Walker deliberately does not name her. Nevertheless, her character is significant because Wile Chile symbolizes all the homeless, marginalized people who have been excluded from the community and devoid of its help and compassion. With that being said, she rejects human contact and cannot be reached. When approached, she is "slipperier than a greased pig," escaping each time. She has no voice in society and struggles with language: "Cursing, [was] the only language she knew" (Walker, *Meridian* 29). Meridian is the only one who succeeds in approaching her, and the sight of a gravid, teenage destitute distresses her: "Meridian lies unresponsive, like a corpse, on the floor of her room for two days" (qtd. in Barnett 84). The vision of pregnant Wild Child provokes a reaction in Meridian, caused by an illness that she inherited from her father and great-grandmother, that manifests itself as a temporary paralysis and loss of consciousness. After recovering from her corpse-like state, Meridian finds strength to help Wild Child. She lures her "with bits of cake and colored beads and unblemished cigarettes" (Walker, *Meridian* 29) and bathes the girl for the first time. Even though Wild Child lives in the slums around Saxon college, she has never been allowed to enter its premises. When Meridian brings her into the honor house, the honor mother is notified of Wile Chile's presence by the other students and threatens Wile Chile to leave by saying that "she must not stay" there (Walker, *Meridian* 29). The honor mother represents the authorities that fail to help the individual in need and fulfill their moral obligation towards another

human being. As Wild Child's "unkempt, unpredictable and loud" disposition does not correspond with the "Saxon ideal and [its] tradition of proper attire and social etiquette" (Pifer 6), the reputation of the college is endangered. Influenced by the house mother's disapproving words, Wild Child soon gets petrified and flees from the house the following morning. When rushing through the streets, she is hit by a car, which ends her life. Wild Child's life ends tragically, with her being alone and frightened, resembling the manner in which she spent most of her life. In the same vein, Wild Child's funeral procession is prohibited from taking place at Saxon College. Wild Child's spirit could not be restrained and shaped by the social norms, and consequently, she dies, proving that in such a society, as Pifer contends, "There is no survival for the unrestrained independent female" (7) and that "the goal of [Saxon] institution is the proper civilization of its young ladies, not the education of their mind" (7).

4.3. The Sojourner Tree

The suppression of the female voice in *Meridian* is also evident in the motif of the Sojourner Tree. The name Sojourner refers to "the largest magnolia tree in the country," which was planted by a slave on the Saxon plantation, today known as Saxon college (Walker, *Meridian* 30). It is a relic of the past in that it tells the story of a slave named Louvinie, whose West African heritage of telling traditional, "intricate" tales with which she "entrap[ped] people" became a legendary symbol of the Saxon college (Wisker 99). Louvinie was not popular among the elderly and, being "tall, thin, strong and not very pleasant to look at," she was designated to work in the kitchen garden (Walker, *Meridian* 33). On the other hand, the curious children loved her and enjoyed listening to her tales that would scare them to their very core. On the children's insistence to be more extravagant in her storytelling, Louvinie told a story of "bloodcurdling horror" that fatally harmed the smallest of Saxon children, characterized by having a "small and flimsy heart" (Walker, *Meridian* 34). As a consequence of her brilliant, scary story, the boy with a weak heart experienced a heart attack, which resulted in his death. The masters of Saxon plantation and the child's parents put the blame for the unfortunate incident on Louvinie, although the tragedy had occurred without a fault of her own. Consequently, as a form of punishment, Louvnie's tongue was cut out by the head of the Saxon plantation: "Louvinie's tongue was kicked toward her in a hail of sand. It was like a thick pink rose petal, bloody at the root. In her own cabin she smoked it until it was as soft and pliable as leather. On a certain day, when the sun turned briefly black, she buried it under

a scrawny magnolia tree on the Saxon plantation" (Walker, *Meridian* 35). Like in the case of Marilene O'Shay, the loss of Louvinie's tongue metaphorically represents the loss of her voice. Being a slave, Louvinie had had little or no voice even before its physical removal. However, Wisker interprets Louvinie's case in terms of gender inequality, as an example of African American women being "discounted, suppressed and repressed" (101). By contrast, the Sojourner blossomed from a "scrawny" tree to a place where students gather for "expression and inspiration" and evolved into "the only complex and meaningful centering point on this otherwise artificial campus" (Pifer 3).

Prior to the story of the Sojourner tree, the narrative regresses to Wild Child's funeral service performed by Meridian and Anne Marion. The students carry the casket with Wild Child's body to the chapel at Saxon college. Yet, their attempt to bury her at the college fails when they approach the gate because the guards prevent them from entering the premises. The president issued an order that banned Wild Child's procession from taking place at the campus chapel. Prompted by the current circumstances, they decide to bury Wild Child in "an overgrown corner of a local black cemetery" (Walker, *Meridian* 39). The night they bury Wild Child is the night they rebel against the president's decision. Meridian suggests that they dismantle the president's house; unfortunately, they ruin the Sojourner tree instead (Walker, *Meridian* 39). Ironically, the tree is ruined by students who are supposed to cherish it for its immense value but fail in their attempt to protest in the name of Wild Child, whose funeral service was banned from the Saxon premises: "In a fury of confusion and frustration they worked all night, and chopped and sawed down, level to the ground, that mighty, ancient, sheltering music tree" (Walker, *Meridian* 39). Their behavior serves as an example of how "the foolish use of avenge for the sake of rebelling produces an adverse effect" (Pifer 7). By ruining the tree that served as a sanctuary for them, the only ones they harm are themselves, whereas the president does not suffer the consequences of his unjust decision. The Sojourner symbolizes the past that was marked by slavery and the inability of the slaves to speak of their sufferings. At the same time, it is a symbol of defiance to oppression as it evolved into a mighty and powerful tree. Through the destruction of the tree by student activists, Walker criticizes violent activism and depicts the consequences of such behavior that only produces harm and fails to achieve a positive outcome. She warns that radical means of activism fail to address the issue at hand and instead shift the focus to meaningless use of avenging that produces an ephemeral sense of satisfaction.

5. The Representation of Meridian

Walker has carefully crafted her central character, whose complexity is revealed by the first words of the novel. The novel is preceded by various definitions of the word "meridian," representing Meridian's personality in form of dictionary entries enlisted for the term "me • rid • i • an," such as, "at the highest point of prosperity, splendor, power" or "the highest apparent point reached by a heavenly body in its course" (Walker, *Meridian* 10). These descriptions of her name implicate that Meridian represents an outstanding activist with the utmost dedication towards accomplishing the Movement's objectives without applying radical militant measures. It is precisely the latter, i.e., her way of fighting for the cause on her own terms, which exclude the use of force, that distinguishes Meridian from the other activists and ultimately leads to her expulsion from the group: "'Then you will kill for the Revolution, not just die for it?' Anne Marion's once lovely voice, beloved voice. 'Like a fool!' the voice added, bitterly and hard. 'I don't know.' 'Shee-it...!' 'But can you say you probably will? That you will.' 'No.' Everyone turned away" (Walker, *Meridian* 25).

The story of how Meridian arrived in Chicokema from New York is narrated retrospectively. The reader is first introduced to Meridian after the Movement's high point, when she is already living in the South: "the opening chapter positions Meridian as a war-worn civil rights worker still marching for justice, still leading those willing to follow" (Warren 65). After her separation from the group, Meridian finds consolation in returning to her roots and helping her community. She pursues equality by means of protesting, and one such occasion occurs when she leads a protest in Chicokema, Georgia as "[the] woman in the cap . . . staring down the tank!" (Walker, *Meridian* 12). Walker metaphorically utilizes the tank as symbol of racial oppression that the locals obtained as they "felt under attack from 'outside agitators'—those members of the black community who thought equal rights for all should extend to blacks" (Walker, *Meridian* 13). Walker also employs irony because those who should feel under attack are not the White locals who acquired the tank, but the colored workers who are repetitively discriminated. There is obvious class division and segregation between White and Black people that is visible while the crowd watches the show portraying Marilene O'Shay, the previously discussed mummified woman in a circus wagon. The "still-as-death Black workers stand along the line of shabby stores and white people stand along bright stores" (Walker, *Meridian* 15). What infuriates Meridian and provokes her to revolt are the conditions dictated by the owner of the travelling show, who limited visiting days for

people of color to Thursdays. Meridian defies such a racially discriminating practice and attempts to modify it by leading the underprivileged, mostly Black and certain White children to see the carnival sideshow on a day prohibited for them to visit (Warren 64). Her efforts to mend the society's discriminative ways exhaust her physically and emotionally and once again provoke her illness, which reappears whenever she faces social injustice and eventually causes her subsequent hair loss and blindness.

Walker introduces the reader to Meridian's early life and determining factors that led to her joining the Movement. Meridian's first boyfriend was Eddie, described as a "sweet," "good-looking," "high school hero type" (Walker, *Meridian* 51). Eddie is the first man she has sexual relations with, which results in her unwanted pregnancy. A clear case of gender discrimination occurs when Meridian is expelled from school for being a pregnant teen, while Eddie is left unscathed. After giving birth to their child, Eddie Jr., Meridian endures the "martyrdom of unsought motherhood" and realizes that the experience is unfulfilling and life-consuming for her. Subsequently, she suffers from a serious case of postpartum depression and contemplates suicide and infanticide (Stein 135). Her depressing and resentful behavior comes forth when she equates motherhood to slavery "So this, she mumbled . . . what slavery is like" (Walker, *Meridian* 58). When Eddie abandons her, she remains indifferent until her "awakening," when her "life is turned upside down by the arrival of voter-registration activists" (Lauret 60).

5.1. Activism and the Subsequent Issues

Meridian begins working as a volunteer after she witnesses the sight of firebombing that "shock[s] [her] into awareness of a larger world beyond her cell-like home" (Stein 135). She is soon persuaded and enchanted by a fellow activist named Truman Held, "who with the charm of his conviction that political change is necessary and possible draws Meridian into the movement" (Lauret 60). Meridian manages to find a purpose in her life that finally gives her energy and drive that have been taken away from her by the burden of motherhood. Due to her engagement in the Movement, Meridian is offered an opportunity to attend Saxon College on a scholarship provided by "a generous white family in Connecticut, who wished to help some of the poor, courageous blacks they saw marching on TV" (Walker, *Meridian* 71). Meridian seizes the chance to make her existence meaningful, which implies certain sacrifice, including giving up on her firstborn child. Meridian does that light heartedly and does not

look back. However, her decision is frowned upon by her Christian mother, who identifies the act as monstrous. Ironically, Mrs. Hill is not at liberty to judge Meridian's decision since she, "taken in by the myth that marriage and motherhood would bring her a fuller life . . . sacrificed her independent existence for her children" (Stein 133). Learning from her mother's mistakes, Meridian refuses to accept the biologically imposed role on herself.

By liberating herself from the constraints of motherhood, Meridian is eager to be a part of Saxon College. Unfortunately, this proves to be an underwhelming experience for her as it demands from her to suppress her past and identity as a mother and ex-wife and accept superficial, narrow ideals promoted in the Saxon song (Stein 135): "We are as chaste and pure as the driven snow. We watch our manners, speech and dress just so" (Walker, *Meridian* 78). However, Meridian instead dedicates her life to the Movement, which she allows to consume her physically and emotionally. Her revolutionary colleagues, who supposedly share the same ideal of freedom and equality, fail to achieve the ideals they advocate and fight for. Equality seems like a distant dream and is only verbally uttered in protests and marches. Truman Held, with whom she is infatuated, proves to be an egocentric and hypocritical man who wants Meridian to "have [his] beautiful black babies" (Walker, *Meridian* 98), while at the same time, he chooses white women, such as Lynne Rabinowitz and a "tiny blonde girl in a tiny, tiny slip," for his lovers (Walker, *Meridian* 144). Truman's efforts to take pride in his African heritage echo in his wearing "flowing Ethiopian robe of extravagantly embroidered white" (Walker, *Meridian* 83). Yet, his upbringing in a predominantly White society culminates in "assimilating with the aesthetic which worships an Anglo-Saxon image of blonde beauty, den[ying] the value of negritude" (Stein 137). Meridian's fleeting liaison with Truman results in her second unwanted pregnancy and subsequent abortion as well as in her great disappointment with his choice of women. By opting for a White woman, Truman demonstrates how "sexual politics and the integrations ethos of the movement came in conflict with each other" (Lauret 60). Meridian does not understand how a Black man who fights for the rights of people of color worships the ideal of a White virgin, while she, on the other hand, embodies the complete opposite of his ideal. Thus, she openly resents him for choosing Lynne over her: "In Lynne you captured your ideal: a virgin who was eager for sex and well-to-do enough to have had worldly experiences" (Walker, *Meridian* 55). He is attracted to women that are perfect in the eyes of society, and Meridian, in contrast, fails to fit into that image by being "a savage who bore her offspring and hid it" (Walker, *Meridian* 56). Although Meridian is a noteworthy activist, she demonstrates a highly biased view on White

women, who are, according to her, "sexless, contemptible and ridiculous by all" (Walker, *Meridian* 90). Although she fights for racial equality, the views of her mother and grandmother negatively influence her perception on White women. Meridian's mother considers White women as "frivolous, helpless creatures, lazy and without ingenuity," and her grandmother perceives White women as "useless, baby-making machines" (Walker, *Meridian* 91). Lynne, as a White woman activist, serves as an example of a "paradox" that is represented through her actions (Stein 137). She sees Truman and people of color in general as "exotic artifacts"; in like manner, Truman perceives Lynne as intriguing and exotic as well (Stein 137). Lynne and Truman corroborate the notion that opposites attract; however, their relationship proves to be unsuccessful from the very beginning. When Lynne reveals to her Jewish parents that she is in a relationship with an African American man, they immediately disown her for having a relationship with a man of color. The problem of an interracial relationship becomes apparent and culminates when Tommy Odds, a fellow activist and Truman's friend, gets shot by White radicals causing him to lose his arm. When Truman visits Tommy in the hospital, he exposes his hatred towards all White people, including Lynne, whom he calls a "white bitch" (Walker, *Meridian* 111). Although Lynne is not involved in the shooting, she is excluded from the movement due to her White race, which becomes controversial in light of recent events. Due to the incident, Tommy retaliates by raping Lynne, who in his own words, "didn't even fight" (Walker, *Meridian* 138). Her lack of resistance can be perceived as a sign of guilt that she feels for being White and, consequently, responsible for the violence inflicted upon Tommy by racist, White men. Lynne becomes increasingly depressive and cries herself to sleep. Her behavior becomes unbearable to Truman, and they soon drift apart. Barnett argues that the relationship between Lynne and Truman is "portrayed as fraught throughout – the book knows that utopia is defined, in part, by the inadequate and unjust social reality it is imagined against" (61). Furthermore, the case of their daughter, Camara, who is brutally murdered, serves as a metaphor for the inability of a racially burdened society to accept an "interracial union" (Wingard 115). Camara, as a mixed-race child, symbolizes their relationship, which was predetermined to fail from its onset for reasons of racial difference between her parents.

Even though Lynne and Truman were united in activism, they were burdened by the societal norms. Through the depiction of an interracial relationship between fellow activists, Walker reveals how racial difference proves to be an irreconcilable bias. Their relationship ends, which symbolically shatters the subsequent dream of equality.

Conclusion

The Civil Rights Movement was and will remain an immensely important revolutionary event that resulted in the abolishing of racial segregation and coming closer to establishing a society devoid of prejudice and discrimination. The Movement's significance and legacy are reflected in Alice Walker's novels *The Color Purple* (1982) and *Meridian* (1976), which depict inequities experienced by women of color. Both novels deal with the marginalization of African American women and their inferior status within society.

The Color Purple portrays Celie, a young, dark-skinned girl living in the rural South, whose race and gender inevitably mark her double oppression. Celie endures rape and abuse at the hands of Black men, who, disempowered and oppressed by society, turn against her weak and fragile figure and thus reinforce the vicious cycle of oppression. Celie's existence is reduced to servitude and sexual exploitation, and she remains indifferent and powerless in the face of injustice until the arrival of Shug Avery. Her life is changed by Shug, who embodies a positive change in her life and encourages her to take control over her existence. Through Shug's agency, Celie embraces the notion "black is beautiful," and Shug becomes her friend, teacher, and sister. She plays an important role in Celie's self-empowerment by helping her start her own business. Shug is also the one who helps rediscover her sister's letters. The subsequent revelation provides Celie with strength to confront Albert's tyranny. Celebrating powerful Black women who, with the help of each other, succeed in emancipating and freeing themselves from oppression, *The Color Purple* advances Walker's idea of "womanism."

The theme of The Civil Rights Movement is more overtly displayed in *Meridian*, whose central figure takes part in the Movement and experiences its ensuing plight concerning the shift from nonviolent to radical forms of activism firsthand. Although *Meridian* has a highly political connotation, it is primarily concerned with the protagonist's personal growth and her way of fighting against discrimination in a nonviolent manner. Meridian commits her life to the Movement and allows herself to absorb the social injustice that exhausts her physically and emotionally. Upon witnessing social injustice, she experiences a recurrent state of paralysis, and her distress consequently causes her temporary blindness and loss of hair. Meridian's deep commitment to the Movement is evident years after it ended, when Meridian is still fighting to eradicate racial discrimination in the small town of Chicokema.

Both novels share the same rural South setting as the locus of highly prevalent racial and gender discrimination. While *The Color Purple* is set at the beginning of the twentieth century, *Meridian* reflects the years during the Movement's peak and the period that followed it. Despite the difference in the time frame, both novels deal with the confinement of Black women by the dominant standards of femininity. Celie is weak and powerless until her awakening through Shug Avery. Shug represents an atypical woman, who dresses provocatively, acts promiscuously, and exerts dominance over men. Shug abandons the traditional female roles and functions as a model for Celie's transformation. On the other hand, Meridian is torn between the motherhood role and her wish to embrace life free from its constraints. Meridian renders the imposed motherhood role life-consuming and equates it with slavery. She thus refuses to ruin her life, like her mother did before her, and decides to sacrifice motherhood for the sake of achieving personal wholeness. Accordingly, the central characters in both novels represent strong Black women who manage to attain happiness and achieve self-empowerment when they abandon the traditional notions of Black femininity. In the course of the two novels, women of color are doubly oppressed because they are both racially discriminated by society and sexually discriminated by Black men, which effectively completes the circle of oppression. Walker thus portrays race and gender as inextricably intertwined and emphasizes the importance of equality that encompasses both concepts – race and gender.

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