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FACULTAD DE FILOLOGÍA

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GRADO EN ESTUDIOS INGLESES

Trabajo de Fin de Grado

The Construction of Identity and Political
Consciousness of a Black Woman in Alice
Walker's *Meridian* (1976)

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Vº Bº

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ABSTRACT

In this essay I will attempt a comprehensive analysis of the protagonist in Alice Walker's novel *Meridian* (1976) in order to illustrate the difficulties and dilemmas that *Meridian*'s eponymous heroine has to experience in her quest for an identity as a black woman. The novel presents the Civil Rights Movement as the historical framework that fosters Meridian's development of her political consciousness and her personal moral values, which are based on nonviolence and racial and gender equality. In this essay, by observing episodes from the novel that highlight sexism and interracial prejudice, I will discuss the oppression that is inflicted on Meridian not only due to her race, but also for being a woman. Hence, to combat this twofold oppression, Meridian actively engages in political activism. However, she has to devise her own limits regarding revolutionary action because the prevailing black nationalism of her time, which advocated violence and male superiority, contradicted her beliefs in pacifism and gender equality. I will also study the influence of Meridian's personal life experiences in the configuration of her identity, focusing on the long-term effects of the traumatic episodes of her past and the deterioration of her health as a symbol of her spiritual elevation. Meridian makes a journey from a life of suffering and self-rejection to a life of self-reliant Civil rights work and selfless sacrifice for her people. Thus, the construction of her identity is inextricably linked to her ideal of an egalitarian community in which Meridian can live freely as a black woman.

KEY WORDS: Alice Walker, *Meridian*, African American, Civil Rights Movement, Black Nationalism, Racism, Sexism, Segregation, Political Consciousness, Mysticism, Identity

RESUMEN

En este ensayo elaboraré un extenso análisis de la protagonista de la novela *Meridian* (1976) de Alice Walker con la finalidad de ilustrar las dificultades y dilemas que la heroína homónima de *Meridian* tiene que experimentar en su búsqueda de identidad como mujer negra. La novela presenta el Movimiento por los Derechos Civiles como el marco histórico que fomenta el desarrollo por parte de Meridian de una conciencia política y unos valores morales personales basados en la no violencia y la igualdad racial y de género. En este ensayo, mediante el estudio de episodios de la novela que resaltan el sexismo y los prejuicios interraciales, trataré la opresión ejercida sobre Meridian no solo por su condición racial, sino también por ser una mujer. En consecuencia, para combatir esta opresión por partida doble, Meridian se involucra activamente en el activismo político. No obstante, tiene que trazar sus propios límites respecto a la acción revolucionaria puesto que el nacionalismo negro prevaleciente en su época, el cual defendía la violencia y la superioridad masculina, contradecía su creencia en el pacifismo y la igualdad de género. También estudiaré la influencia de las experiencias personales de la vida de Meridian sobre la configuración de su identidad, centrándome en los efectos a largo plazo de los episodios traumáticos de su pasado, y del deterioro de su salud como un símbolo de su elevación espiritual. Meridian realiza un viaje desde una vida de sufrimiento y auto-rechazo hasta una vida de trabajo autosuficiente por los Derechos Civiles y sacrificio altruista por su pueblo. De este modo, la construcción de su identidad está indisolublemente ligada a su ideal de una comunidad igualitaria en la cual Meridian pueda vivir libremente como mujer negra.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Alice Walker, *Meridian*, Afroamericano, Movimiento por los Derechos Civiles, Nacionalismo Negro, Racismo, Sexismo, Segregación, Conciencia Política, Misticismo, Identidad

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Introduction

After decades of slavery, subjugation and racial segregation, in the 1950s and 1960s thousands of African Americans living in the Southern United States began the Civil Rights Movement (1954-68) to claim full citizenship rights for the black community and to demand the abolishment of discriminatory policies such as racially segregated public facilities. A large part of the young black population, especially university students, became political activists and participated in numerous marches, protests and acts of rebellion. African American writer Alice Walker (b. 1944) was strongly committed to the fight for Civil Rights and actively took part in the Civil Rights Movement, thereby becoming a key figure in the advocacy of racial and gender equality even till the present day. In her second novel, *Meridian* (1976), Alice Walker combines the importance of political struggle with the personal conflicts of Meridian, a young female civil rights worker. As a black woman involved in political activism, Meridian is exposed to instances of racial and gender-based discrimination that trigger both her quest for an egalitarian society and her vindication of an individual identity. Thus, Meridian embarks on an introspective journey that involves challenging white and African American racist and sexist ideologies, as well as finding a balance between “community identification and individual self-discovery” (Cardon 160). In this essay I will demonstrate that adhering to an individual ethos proves crucial for the formation of Meridian’s identity and political consciousness not only as a black woman, but as a human being who is able to assert her personal moral values, informed by the notions of peace and equality, against an unfavourable environment of discrimination and violence.

1. Meridian's Political Activism as a Response to Societal Racism and Sexism

The Civil Rights Movement promoted nonviolence and encouraged all citizens, irrespective of their race or gender, to participate in it. This inclusive ideology awoke Meridian's interest in political activism, as she saw in it a means of combating societal racism and sexism. In this section, I will discuss the effects of societal impositions caused by prejudices and stereotypes associated with race and gender roles on Meridian in order to demonstrate that she uses political activism as a means of channelling her dissatisfaction towards social hierarchy. Finally, I will discuss the moral dilemma that Meridian has to face when radical political movements based on Black Nationalism arise and, in advocating violence and male predominance, made the fight against white oppression deviate from her ideals of gender and racial equality and nonviolence.

1.1 Racial Prejudice and Stereotyping as the Origin of Interracial Hatred in *Meridian*

As a result of cultural, economic and political supremacy of white citizens and the invisibility of black people in the 1960s American society, this sharp racial segregation led to profound hatred, stigmatization and outbursts of violence between whites and African Americans. A major consequence of such segregation as evident in *Meridian* that I would like to highlight is ethnic prejudice and negative stereotyping. In *Meridian*, Walker features black people's prejudices against whites, which stem from white enslavement and denigration of blacks, in order to illustrate how race-inspired hatred only generates more hatred. In the novel, it can be found that before getting to know Lynne Rabinowitz, a white Jewish activist who will become Truman's wife, Meridian's interaction with white women had been almost inexistent and yet she had a prefabricated opinion of them as "frivolous, helpless creatures, lazy and without ingenuity" (Walker, *Meridian* 109-110). This mental portrayal of white women was constructed by Meridian around preconceived ideas based on what her mother had told her. Thus, it can be argued that through her mother, she had internalized a strong

hatred against white people. However, she attempts to overcome this hatred when Lynne becomes a core piece of her life. Indeed, in the chapter titled “Two Women”, Meridian tells Lynne that she has “tried very hard not to hate [her]” and that, fortunately, she thinks she has succeeded (Walker, *Meridian* 191). Hence, despite the societal prevailing interracial hatred, Meridian manages to control her instinctive loathing of white women and see beyond race labels.

1.2 Meridian’s Vindication of Her Black Identity: Womanism Versus Gender Stereotypes

Now I will proceed to explore how Alice Walker incorporates feminist ideology with racial issues mentioned in the previous section in the development of the character of Meridian. This combination is the main subject of Womanism¹, a term coined by Alice Walker that can be defined as “a feminist awareness that reflected the experiences of black women” (Cardon 164). *Meridian* can be considered a womanist novel because, according to Roberta Hendrickson, “it combines the black consciousness and feminist consciousness that grew out of the Civil Rights Movement” (113). Hence, I will examine how Meridian disrupts the stereotypes of traditional womanhood through her untraditional approach to maternity, which motivates her womanist vindication of her rights both as a black person and as a woman in control of her own life and body.

Beginning with Meridian’s upbringing, her mother’s failure to provide her with information regarding romantic relationships and sexual intercourse leaves adolescent Meridian helpless and unprepared to confront her relationship with her partner –and later husband– Eddie in a mature way. The notion widely accepted in Meridian’s society that women were obliged to please their partners sexually, combined with Meridian’s lack of sexual education, ends in her early pregnancy, which results in her discovering that she lacks

¹ The term Womanism was first used by Alice Walker in her collection of essays titled *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens: Womanist Prose*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983.

maternal instincts and that she is not prepared for “a life of resentful motherhood” (Cardon 172). This feeling of “maternal inadequacy” (Hollenberg 83) challenges her identity as a black woman because, as explained by Sampada Chavan, “African American women were burdened with the idea that they had to become mothers in order to fulfil a notion of ideal womanhood” (189). This notion of idealized black motherhood is reflected in the passage in which Meridian’s thoughts about her role as a mother are revealed: “She thought of her mother as being worthy of this maternal history, and of herself as belonging to an unworthy minority, for which there was no precedent and of which she was, as far as she knew, the only member” (Walker, *Meridian* 90).

Therefore, when Meridian eventually gives her son up for adoption and refuses to consecrate her life to childbearing, she feels that she has betrayed her foremother’s tradition of maternal devotion, thereby “[failing] to honour their experience” (Duck 451). Nevertheless, by transgressing these stereotypes of womanhood, Meridian steps out of the mould that society has constructed for African American women and, in the words of Lynn Pifer, “stops living by other’s standards [and] learns to bloom for herself” (84). Hence, Meridian learns to embrace her identity as a black woman without subjecting herself to the stereotypes of the oppressed black and/or submissive woman. It is precisely this double vindication of the protagonist’s identity as a black person and as a woman what characterises *Meridian* as a Womanist novel.

1.3 Meridian’s Dilemma between Loyalty to Political Activism and Respect for Ethical Principles

As a response to her disconformity with the subjugation that black people and especially black women suffered in her society, Meridian engages in political action in favour of the Civil Rights Movement. Nevertheless, her commitment to political activism will be jeopardised by the rise of radical political movements. In the 1970s, radical movements

founded in the previous decades such as Black Nationalism and Black Power rose to prominence in the political scene. These movements defended a new conception of the revolution, which was now exclusively led by male black activists, and advocated violent action. This radicalisation of political activism implied a new understanding of interracial relationships and gender roles among black militants. Whites were no longer welcomed to join the fight for equality and black women were considered subordinated to black men. Due to this racist, violent and oppressive approach undertaken by the black militants, Meridian discovers that she is not entirely sympathetic with the emerging ideals of Black Nationalism. Consequently, Meridian faces a serious moral dilemma regarding her involvement in political activism due to her conflicting interests between remaining loyal to her political commitment and adhering to her ethical principles of pacifism and equality, the latter emerging as her final choice.

When asked whether she would “kill for the Revolution”, Meridian realises that there is something in her that differentiates her from the rest of her fellow activists, as she is unable to reply with “a positive yes” (Walker, *Meridian* 14). According to Lynn Pifer, Meridian refuses to kill because she believes that killing another human being is tyrannical behaviour that ironically reproduces the very tyranny that the Civil Rights workers were supposedly attempting to eradicate (77). In fact, Meridian’s claim that “to her even revolutionary murder was murder” shows that she was more concerned with universal human ethics and respecting the right to life than adhere to political extremism (Walker, *Meridian* 14). In addition, Meridian feels ill at ease with Black Nationalist ideology because of the secondary role to which women were relegated. As Roberta Hendrickson points out, “at that time, some black (and white) women, like their foremothers in the Anti-Slavery Movement, began to see, in their relationship to the men in the [Black Nationalist] Movement, an analogy to the racist oppression of black people” (113). As a consequence of this patriarchal oppression, together

with the aforementioned advocacy of violence, Meridian finds herself unrepresented by the Black Nationalist movement and decides to prioritise her individual pacific and egalitarian beliefs, thereby detaching herself from organised groups of activists and limiting her political struggle to “spontaneous and symbolic acts of rebellion” and independent Civil Rights work (Pifer 78). Hence, it can be said that Meridian emerges as a person who rejects not just stereotypical roles assigned to black women, but also does not deviate from her political beliefs –i.e., equal rights for all ethnicities, non-discriminatory laws and pacifistic political activism– even when they are in opposition with the mainstream ideology.

2. Shaping Meridian’s Identity: The configuration of Individual Values through Personal Experiences and Political Consciousness

In addition to Meridian’s struggle against societal racism and sexism as studied in the previous part, in the second chapter of this paper I will examine other factors that contribute towards constructing the identity of *Meridian’s* protagonist. Beginning with an explanation of the non-linearity of the novel as a device used to show how Meridian’s past experiences influence her future, I will explore the consequences of painful feelings such as guilt and rejection in the configuration of her personality. Next, I will illustrate how Meridian’s rare illness becomes a symbol of her ascension into mysticism, leading her to become a spiritual leader in her community. To conclude, I will draw a connection between Meridian’s personal values and her political ideology of collective solidarity in order to highlight the message ultimately conveyed by the novel. This message proclaims that the political consciousness is an essential part of a black woman’s identity, and it must be combined with a personal background of life experiences that provide her with a deep understanding of her needs and the needs of her people so that she can make her contribution towards a community in which her identity is respected and valued.

2.1 The Effects of Traumatic Experiences from the Past on Meridian's Personality: Guilt and Rejection

The narrative of *Meridian* is non-linear; in fact, in the novel, episodes of the protagonist's past are consecutively interwoven with events from her present. This alternation is not arbitrary but carefully designed by Walker to disclose how Meridian's personality as an adult is determined by her need to disengage from the traumatic experiences of her past. For this reason, Meridian is presented at the beginning of the novel as rather emotionally detached from the people around her; however, as the novel progresses, the reader learns that this detachment is Meridian's method of self-protecting herself from the painful effects of the feelings of guilt and rejection regarding her mother and former husband.

Right from her childhood, Meridian is able to perceive that her mother emanates feelings of resentment towards her. This perception causes a permanent feeling of guilt in her for which she initially cannot find a rational explanation. As she grows older, Meridian comes to understand that for Mrs. Hill, having children was comparable to "being buried alive" because "her personal life was over" (Walker, *Meridian* 42). Therefore, she feels guilty "for stealing her mother's serenity [and] for shattering her mother's emerging self" (Walker, *Meridian* 43). This perpetual feeling of culpability is the origin of Meridian perceiving herself as unworthy of love. Indeed, she believes that there are certain "conditions" required to deserve love, which she "was never able to meet" (Walker, *Meridian* 18). This feeling of unworthiness entails an attitude of abnegation in the face of rejection that manifests itself in Meridian's romantic relationship with Truman, her partner. Because Meridian has been married to other man with whom she had a child, Truman feels "repelled by Meridian's complicated sexual history because she has violated the institutions of virginity and motherhood that he was raised to respect" (Hollenberg 84). As a result of this sexist ideology, he abandons her to start having several affairs with white women. Meridian accepts Truman's

philandering precisely because she thinks of herself as undeserving of love. However, the emotional harm that enduring guilt and rejection inflicted on the protagonist leads Meridian to distance herself from intimate personal bonds and become more independent, even though she preserved the memories of the tormenting experiences from her yesteryears. This interpersonal detachment becomes an essential trait of Meridian's self-created identity, as she decides to prioritise her self-reliant Civil Rights work over intimate relationships that were a traumatic source of pain and remorse in her past, thereby learning to deal with "the conflict between personal needs and public commitment" (Walker, Melissa 169).

2.2 The Significance of Meridian's Illness: A Journey from the Physical to the Spiritual

When confronted with traumatic experiences or emotional shocks, Meridian shows an auto-destructive tendency to "neglect . . . her health to the point of collapse" (Duck 448). Meridian's reason for undervaluing her body stems from her comprehension of it as a physical "obstruction" in her pursuit of spiritual growth (Walker, *Meridian* 97). This "disregard for the body" reaches its peak when Meridian suffers an inexplicable illness that erodes her health and paralyses her for long periods of time (Brown 313). In this section, I will explore how Meridian's illness evolves from a physical pathology to a vehicle that allows her to evade material reality, thereby contributing to create the mystical aspect of her identity. I will argue that through the introduction of Meridian's illness and mysticism in the novel, Walker "reveals the value of staying connected to a community, [and] she also highlights the courage of a woman who places her own principles above a mass mentality", thereby creating a figure who is beyond the ordinary world because she forsakes her own needs in pursuit of her spiritual goal to be at peace with herself and with the rest of society (Cardon 177).

For the young Meridian physical paralysis emerges as a frequent bodily reaction when she feels her emotional well-being threatened by external intrusions. For instance, when her mother accuses her of stealing, she is completely paralysed: "A stillness fell over Meridian

and for seconds she could not move” (*Meridian* 43). This total paralysis is a response to the feelings of guilt and remorse that this accusation provokes in her. However, for the adult Meridian, paralysis is a state of abstraction from the outer world “after her forays against white racist society” (Stein 139). This idea is exemplified in the opening chapter during her confrontation with the local authorities in order to defend the rights of black children. In this episode, she is physically weak due to her illness and has to gather all her strength to “[step] forward to challenge injustice” (Stein 139). After the confrontation, she suffers from paralysis, which in the given context becomes the state of repose she needs afterwards to recover her life-force energy. Hence, the changing formulations of what paralysis means in Meridian’s life show her evolution towards introspection, i.e., how she gains the capacity to resort to her inner world in order to be at peace with herself.

Now, I would like to highlight the close connection between Meridian’s illness and her role as a martyr and a mystical figure in her community. The novel *Meridian* has been heralded as Walker’s “first extended meditation on mysticism” due to the protagonist’s acquisition of a role akin to a mystical religious martyr among the members of her community (Brown 313). This elevation to a spiritual status is a process that runs parallel to her disregard of her health; the more concerned she is with exercising her ethical principles, the less she attends to her bodily needs. Although Meridian herself never believed in religion, she shares many of the characteristics generally attributed to religious prophets and martyrs: she defies the mainstream ideology that oppresses women and black people, even if it involves confronting the authorities, and she “offers herself as a martyr for her people’s freedom” by putting her life at risk while defending the rights of black people (Hendrickson 115). Therefore, her people revere her as someone equivalent to a New-Age messiah to the extent that Meridian is compared by them to God (Walker, *Meridian* 7). The relevance of this mystical, godly facet of her identity –created by her willingness to self-sacrifice, together with

her profound spirituality– lies in the fact that it grants her the power “to do bigger and better things for her people” thus being pivotal in her journey from individualism to a community worker (Chavan 195).

To close this chapter I will briefly analyse how Meridian’s aforementioned personal experiences are interwoven with her political consciousness to shape her ideal of community, which consists of an egalitarian society achieved through pacifism. Meridian’s experiences with racism, sexism and suffering throughout her life, as mentioned in previous sections, lead her to the conviction that discrimination and violence perpetuate hatred and destroy everything that is worthy in life. For this reason, Meridian aspires for a community in which the values of solidarity, equality and non-violence prevail over prejudices. Hence, for this purpose Meridian consecrates her life to political activism, independent Civil Rights work and helping the people around her. Karen Stein wisely highlights Meridian’s altruistic nature by claiming that “in her unswerving dedication to nonviolence, her patience and her careful respect for others, Meridian upholds the spiritual ideals of a human liberation movement” (130).

In summary, one can claim that regardless of race, gender or social position, Meridian is compassionate towards people around her because she believes in an egalitarian community based on solidarity and non-violence in which every member is accepted and respected. Thus, several different strands of Meridian’s identity, i.e., a black person, a woman, an activist, a mystic or a martyr, are intrinsically connected to her political vision of an ideal community of fraternity, acceptance and peace.

Conclusion

Meridian is much more than a novel about the Civil Rights Movement. It is unquestionably a novel about the need to eradicate racial and gender-based oppression in the

American society, but it even goes far beyond these ideas: *Meridian* is a novel about human solidarity, independence and self-discovery. Through the character of Meridian, Alice Walker “explore[s] issues of gender as well as race: [S]he explores the effects of the burden of history, of growing up in a racist society. . .” to reveal the complicated nature of the mission undertaken by black women to assert their identity in a society dominated by white male patriarchy (Hendrickson 126). *Meridian*’s introspective journey has been interpreted by Lauren Cardon as a pilgrimage “from civil rights to Black Nationalism, from female subjugation to feminist consciousness. . . [and] from alienation to acceptance within a community.” (161). Hence, in this essay I have taken into account all these character transitions, examining the process by which a young Meridian who was rejected by her family, forced into maternity and involved in violent rebellious acts is transformed into an adult Meridian, emotionally independent, who has developed a mature political consciousness and performs the role of a spiritual leader in her community. In this process, Meridian seeks an environment in which she can “heal and re-create” her identity as a black woman (Walker, *Meridian* 236). As she re-creates herself by rejecting socially imposed roles, she contributes to the healing process of other characters in order to achieve her ideal of a community in which all human beings are equal and live in pacific fraternity with each other. In doing so, Meridian teaches us a great lesson about the importance of self-acceptance, loyalty to one’s principles, and vindication of individual identity.

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