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ALIENATION, WOMANHOOD, AND SOCIAL RESISTANCE IN ALICE WALKER'S MERIDIAN: A SOCIOLOGICAL REIMAGINING OF WOMANIST LITERATURE

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Abstract

This paper reexamines Alice Walker's Meridian (1976) not only as a feminist or womanist text but as a sociologically significant narrative that documents the interplay of race, gender, class, and activism in twentieth, century America. By drawing on sociological theories of alienation (Karl Marx), double consciousness (W. E. B. Du Bois), racial psychology (Frantz Fanon), cultural representation (Edward Said), and intersectionality (Kimberlé Crenshaw), the analysis positions Meridian as a literary, sociological exploration of the ways Black women navigate oppression and construct communal identities. Through the protagonist's struggles with motherhood, alienation, and activism, Walker humanizes sociological concepts and illustrates how literature can serve as a mirror and agent of social transformation. The article integrates literary criticism with sociological frameworks, presenting Walker's novel as both a narrative of personal emancipation and a manifesto for collective survival.

INTRODUCTION

1. Sociology of Literature and Alice Walker's Humanism

The sociology of literature as a field of inquiry investigates how literary texts both reflect and shape the social realities in which they are produced. Scholars such as Raymond Williams (1977) and Lucien Goldmann (1975) have argued that literature is a form of social consciousness that cannot be divorced from the historical and cultural conditions of its emergence. Within the African American tradition, literature has often doubled as both aesthetic expression and sociological testimony, articulating the lived experiences of racism, sexism, and economic exploitation. Alice Walker's Meridian exemplifies this intersection: the novel narrates the psychological and political journey of its protagonist while simultaneously documenting the sociological tensions of the Civil Rights era.

Walker's concept of womanism, articulated in In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens (1983), provides a unique entry point into the sociology of literature. A womanist, Walker explains, is committed not only to the survival of Black women but to the survival and wholeness of all people (Walker, 1983, p. xi). Thus, womanism is both a literary ethos and a sociological framework. Meridian Hill's struggles in the novel—alienation from traditional roles, rejection of normative motherhood, and devotion to communal activism—mirror the contradictions of social structures that impose restrictive norms upon women of color. By situating Walker's novel within both literary criticism and sociological theory, this article aims to demonstrate how Meridian humanizes abstract sociological concepts and renders them accessible through narrative.

2. Alienation, Selfhood, and Social Dislocation

Alienation, in sociological theory, is one of the most significant concepts for understanding the human experience under systems of inequality. Karl Marx first formulated alienation as the estrangement of the worker from his labor, the product of his work, and his own human essence under capitalism (Marx, 1844/1978, p. 72). Although Walker's *Meridian* is not explicitly an economic novel, Meridian Hill's journey dramatizes a different, yet related, kind of alienation: a profound social and psychological estrangement that arises from racism, sexism, and the contradictions of political activism. Meridian does not merely feel disconnected from her community or from herself—her alienation is systemic, the direct outcome of social expectations and institutional structures that reduce Black women to symbolic roles, often denying them full human agency.

Meridian Hill's alienation begins with her early experiences of motherhood and marriage. Married at a young age and burdened by an unplanned pregnancy, she finds herself trapped in a role that feels more like incarceration than fulfilment. Her confession—"So this is what slavery is like" (Walker, 1976, p. 88)—links her personal oppression as a woman to the broader historical memory of racial slavery. Here, alienation is not abstract but embodied: she feels enslaved within the institution of marriage and motherhood. This aligns with Marx's description of alienation as a lived, bodily estrangement; Meridian's body becomes the site of constraint rather than liberation. Her eventual decision to relinquish her child is interpreted by society as a failure of womanhood, deepening her social dislocation. She is ostracized not only for breaking with gender norms but also for refusing to participate in the cultural idealization of motherhood that sustains collective identity within her community.

This form of estrangement resonates with **W. E. B. Du Bois's concept of double consciousness**. Du Bois famously described African American identity as the condition of "always looking at oneself through the eyes of others" (Du Bois, 1903, p. 2). For Meridian, the gaze of others—family, neighbours, fellow activists, and especially men—becomes a measure against which she constantly falls short. She is judged for giving up her child, for refusing to marry again, for being physically fragile, and even for the form her activism takes. Du Bois's formulation helps us see that Meridian's alienation is doubled: she is not only separated from herself but is also forced to internalize the external gaze of a society that polices her identity. Her alienation, therefore, is not purely internal conflict but the effect of structural racism and patriarchy embedded within everyday life.

The Civil Rights Movement, which might have provided Meridian with belonging and purpose, paradoxically becomes another site of alienation. Sociologically, this reflects Robert Merton's theory of strain: when socially approved goals (equality, justice) cannot be fully achieved through the available means (activism, protest), individuals experience strain and disillusionment (Merton, 1938/1968, p. 212). Meridian experiences this when she realizes that the movement, though radical in its aims, often reproduces gender hierarchies and sidelines women. Her relationship with Truman Held is particularly telling. Truman replaces her with Lynne, a white woman whose activism seems more valued in certain circles. Meridian's alienation here is intersectional—it is produced by race, gender, and the politics of desire. She is displaced not only as a lover but also as a comrade, witnessing how even within radical spaces, Black women are marginalized. This echoes Kimberlé Crenshaw's notion of intersectionality, which explains how overlapping oppressions prevent Black women from being recognized fully either within feminist or anti, racist struggles (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 140).

At a psychological level, Meridian's alienation can also be read through the lens of **Frantz Fanon's analysis in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952)**. Fanon argues that colonized subjects often suffer from a form of cultural schizophrenia, where they internalize colonial values while rejecting their own. Though Meridian is not a colonized subject in the literal sense, her condition mirrors this fractured identity. She cannot fully embrace the prescribed role of mother or wife, yet she cannot entirely escape the guilt imposed by her community's expectations. Her psychosomatic illnesses—fainting spells, paralysis, exhaustion—become bodily manifestations of alienation, reflecting Fanon's insight that colonization is not just political but deeply psychological. Walker's narrative thus shows alienation as an embodied condition, where Meridian's body becomes a battleground for conflicting social demands.

The sociology of alienation also allows us to situate Meridian within broader historical processes. As scholars such as Patricia Hill Collins (1990) argue, African American women historically occupy a "matrix of domination" in which race, class, and gender intersect to produce unique forms of marginalization. Meridian's alienation exemplifies this matrix. She is not alienated simply as a woman or as an African American but as both, simultaneously. Her estrangement from normative motherhood, from her activist peers, and from her own desires illustrates how social structures force Black women into what Collins calls "outsider, within" positions—neither fully included nor fully excluded, but always marginalized (Collins, 1990, p. 14). In this way, Meridian's alienation is not a personal flaw but a sociological condition, symptomatic of systemic inequalities.

Yet, alienation in *Meridian* is not purely destructive. It becomes, paradoxically, the foundation of consciousness and transformation. This recalls Marx's suggestion that alienation, once recognized, can generate revolutionary awareness (Marx, 1844/1978, p. 90). Meridian's solitude, her sense of being an outcast, enables her to see more clearly the hypocrisies of both mainstream society and the Civil Rights Movement. Rather than withdrawing into despair, she channels her estrangement into a new form of activism that is grounded not in recognition or heroic visibility but in care, endurance, and service. Her alienation thus becomes a sociological catalyst: by being outside traditional roles, she gains a perspective that allows her to critique and reconstruct them.

Alienation also intersects with geography in Walker's novel. Meridian is often depicted as wandering through rural Southern landscapes, visiting poor Black communities, teaching, and nurturing the marginalized. These spaces of marginality mirror her own internal condition, but they also offer her a way to reconstitute community. Alienation drives her into contact with those similarly dislocated by racism and poverty, suggesting that the sociological function of alienation is to create solidarity among the excluded. This resonates with **Émile Durkheim's insight** that social suffering, while destructive, can also generate collective consciousness when individuals recognize their shared conditions (Durkheim, 1897/1951, p. 209). Meridian's alienation thus moves her beyond individual despair into collective care, embodying the transition from private estrangement to social commitment.

Finally, Meridian's alienation raises broader questions about the role of literature in representing social dislocation. Walker's narrative style—fragmented, non, linear, often shifting between past and present—mirrors the fractured consciousness of her protagonist. This stylistic alienation reinforces the thematic alienation, making the novel itself an experiment in representing sociological fragmentation. In doing so, Walker demonstrates what Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o calls the "decolonization of the mind" (Ngũgĩ, 1986, p. 4): by refusing linear, Eurocentric narrative forms, she creates a space where the dislocated consciousness of Black

women can be represented authentically. Alienation, therefore, is not only a theme within the novel but also a narrative strategy that enacts the very dislocations it describes.

In sum, alienation in *Meridian* is both a condition and a catalyst. It estranges Meridian from society, motherhood, activism, and even her own body, but it also equips her with the vision to resist oppressive structures. When read through Marx, Du Bois, Fanon, Collins, and Crenshaw, Walker's novel emerges as a sociological exploration of how alienation can be reimagined as a resource for consciousness, solidarity, and resistance. Meridian Hill, the "unlikely heroine," embodies the paradox that alienation, while painful, can be the ground from which new forms of selfhood and social belonging are born.

3. Motherhood, Womanhood, and Social Roles

In Alice Walker's *Meridian*, motherhood and womanhood are not merely personal experiences but deeply social institutions. The novel interrogates how these roles are constructed, imposed, and redefined within a racially stratified society. Sociologically, motherhood is one of the most significant institutions shaping women's lives; it operates as both a cultural expectation and a structural mechanism that defines women's place in the family and community. In the African American context, the meanings of motherhood are further complicated by histories of slavery, systemic racism, and economic exploitation. *Meridian* situates its protagonist at the center of this tension, showing how her refusal to conform to normative expectations of womanhood and motherhood leads to alienation but also enables the creation of alternative, revolutionary forms of care and social responsibility.

At the outset, Meridian's motherhood is depicted as reluctant and unfulfilling. Becoming pregnant as a teenager, she experiences motherhood less as joy than as an imposition. Her early reflections on childbearing—"So this is what slavery is like" (Walker, 1976, p. 88)—draw a direct analogy between reproductive roles and historical enslavement. This statement humanizes the sociological argument that motherhood, when socially enforced, becomes a form of structural domination. Feminist sociologist Ann Oakley has observed that "motherhood is both a natural and a social role, but as a social role it is profoundly ideological" (Oakley, 1979, p. 186). Meridian's rejection of the maternal role thus disrupts the ideological script that equates womanhood with motherhood. Her decision to give up her child, though condemned by her community, represents a radical assertion of autonomy in a context where Black women's reproductive choices have long been policed and controlled.

From a sociological perspective, this moment is critical because it demonstrates how personal decisions intersect with collective norms. Émile Durkheim's concept of *collective consciousness* is useful here: societies sustain themselves by enforcing shared values and expectations, including those around motherhood (Durkheim, 1893/1984, p. 62). For Meridian's community, the "good mother" is central to social continuity. Meridian's refusal, therefore, marks her as a deviant figure, estranged from the community's moral order. Yet Walker invites us to see this deviation not as pathological but as revolutionary. By rejecting biological motherhood, Meridian redefines the meaning of care, expanding it beyond the private sphere into the public, political domain. She becomes what Patricia Hill Collins (1990) calls a practitioner of "othermothering"—a tradition in African American communities where women collectively care for children not biologically their own. In this sense, Meridian's motherhood is communal rather than individual, political rather than biological.

Walker thus situates Meridian's womanhood outside the confines of domesticity. Instead of embodying the "angel in the house," Meridian becomes a figure of political and spiritual nurture. She tends to jailed protestors, cares for children abandoned by the system, and supports

impoverished rural communities. This reconceptualization resonates with Collins's claim that Black women have historically redefined motherhood as "a site of empowerment, where survival strategies and community solidarity are passed on" (Collins, 1990, p. 123). In Meridian's case, motherhood is not tied to birthing or raising her own child but to nurturing the social body. Her maternal instincts are redirected toward the collective, embodying what Walker (1983) herself calls a "womanist" ethic: committed to the survival and wholeness of all people, male and female.

The conflict between normative and revolutionary motherhood in *Meridian* also highlights broader debates within feminist sociology. Many mainstream feminist movements, particularly those dominated by white women in the 1960s and 1970s, tended to critique motherhood as a form of patriarchal oppression. However, for Black women, the issue was more complex. As Dorothy Roberts argues in *Killing the Black Body* (1997), Black women have historically faced not only the pressure to mother but also the denial of their reproductive autonomy through forced sterilizations, welfare policies, and systemic neglect. Walker's portrayal of Meridian reflects this dual reality: she is condemned for rejecting motherhood, yet her community also devalues the ways she enacts care outside biological reproduction. This tension demonstrates the racialized dimensions of motherhood as a social institution.

Furthermore, Meridian's struggle with womanhood extends beyond motherhood. She is often judged for failing to embody traditional femininity: she is not physically strong, her beauty is understated, and she does not seek romantic validation. In many ways, she embodies what Simone de Beauvoir described in *The Second Sex* as "the Other"—a figure whose identity is always defined in opposition to male norms (de Beauvoir, 1949/2011, p. 16). Yet Meridian resists this othering by crafting her own definition of womanhood. Instead of aligning with romantic or domestic roles, she chooses a solitary and sacrificial path of activism. Her selfhood is thus forged not in conformity to societal expectations but in resistance to them. This redefinition reflects Walker's broader womanist vision, which, unlike some strands of feminism, emphasizes inclusivity, spirituality, and community survival.

The theme of motherhood in *Meridian* also intersects with the history of slavery and its aftermath. During slavery, Black women's reproductive capacities were exploited for economic gain, their children often sold away, and their maternal bonds brutally disrupted. This history reverberates in Meridian's own ambivalence toward motherhood. By associating childbirth with slavery, she draws on collective memory to critique the ways Black women's bodies have historically been sites of control. Her rejection of traditional motherhood can thus be seen as an act of historical resistance, a refusal to participate in an institution that has long been weaponized against Black women. Here, Walker aligns with scholars like Angela Davis, who in *Women, Race, and Class* (1981) documents how reproductive oppression has been central to Black women's experiences. Meridian's individual choice thus symbolizes a broader struggle for reproductive justice and autonomy.

At the same time, Walker avoids portraying Meridian as entirely rejecting the maternal role. Instead, she reframes it. Meridian becomes a "spiritual mother" to her community, embodying what Deborah McDowell calls the "self in bloom" (McDowell, 1993, p. 170). This metaphor suggests growth, resilience, and the ability to nurture beyond biological ties. By caring for the marginalized, Meridian demonstrates that motherhood can be revolutionary when decoupled from patriarchal structures. Her motherhood is not about producing heirs or sustaining family lineage but about sustaining justice and communal survival. This reconceptualization is sociologically significant because it challenges dominant cultural narratives about gender roles, proposing instead a collective, activist model of care.

The novel also complicates the relationship between motherhood and guilt. Meridian is haunted by her decision to give up her child, hearing a voice that curses her existence for failing to live up to the maternal standard (Walker, 1976, p. 69). This guilt illustrates how deeply ingrained cultural expectations of motherhood are, even for women who consciously resist them. From a sociological perspective, this reflects what Michel Foucault describes as *disciplinary power*—the internalization of norms that govern behavior (Foucault, 1977, p. 138). Meridian's guilt is less about personal failure than about the successful imposition of disciplinary norms around motherhood. Yet her ability to transform this guilt into activism represents resistance to such power. By redirecting her maternal energies toward community activism, she subverts the disciplinary function of motherhood and reclaims it as a liberatory practice.

Meridian's reimagining of womanhood and motherhood is deeply relevant for contemporary sociological debates. In today's context of intersectional feminism and reproductive justice movements, her struggles resonate with ongoing battles over women's rights, childcare, and the policing of reproductive choices. Walker's novel anticipates these debates by presenting a protagonist who insists on defining her womanhood on her own terms, even at great personal cost. Meridian shows that motherhood need not be confined to biology or patriarchy but can be a site of radical social transformation. In doing so, the novel humanizes sociological theories, showing how abstract debates about roles and norms play out in lived experiences of pain, guilt, and resilience.

4. Race, Coloniality, and Psychological Struggles

Race lies at the heart of Alice Walker's *Meridian*, shaping not only the external conditions of the protagonist's life but also her internal struggles. Race, as sociologist Stuart Hall has argued, is not a fixed biological essence but a "floating signifier," a social construct that changes according to historical and cultural contexts (Hall, 1996, p. 443). In the United States, race has historically been the primary axis of social division, justifying slavery, segregation, and systemic inequalities. For Black women like Meridian Hill, race intersects with gender and class, creating what Patricia Hill Collins (1990) calls a "matrix of domination." Walker's novel illustrates how racial oppression permeates both personal identity and collective struggle, producing psychological as well as material consequences. Through Meridian's experiences, the novel shows how race operates as both an external system of coloniality and an internal burden on selfhood.

To understand the psychological dimensions of race in *Meridian*, it is instructive to turn to **Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952)**. Fanon argued that racism produces a deep psychic wound in colonized subjects, forcing them to internalize the inferiority imposed by the dominant culture. Although Fanon was writing in the context of French colonialism, his insights resonate powerfully with the African American experience. Meridian's bodily ailments—her fainting spells, paralysis, and psychosomatic illnesses—can be read as physical manifestations of this psychic fracture. Her body carries the weight of racialized oppression, illustrating Fanon's assertion that colonization is not only political and economic but also inscribes itself on the psyche and the body. In Walker's narrative, illness becomes metaphor: Meridian's fragility symbolizes the toll of systemic racism on Black women's bodies and minds.

Meridian's racial struggle is not only personal but also communal. She belongs to a generation caught between the remnants of Jim Crow segregation and the promises of the Civil Rights Movement. The novel vividly depicts rural Black communities deprived of resources, education, and healthcare—conditions that reflect what sociologists call *structural racism*. This

systemic inequality is not accidental but historically produced, a continuation of what Du Bois in *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935) described as the "wages of whiteness": the economic, political, and psychological advantages conferred upon white people at the expense of Black communities. Meridian's activism in these neglected communities underscores Walker's sociological realism. By teaching, organizing, and caring for the poor, Meridian confronts the racial inequities embedded in American institutions. Yet, her sense of alienation reveals that even activism cannot fully erase the psychological scars of racial oppression.

Race also structures relationships within the Civil Rights Movement itself. Meridian's romantic and political relationship with Truman Held illustrates the persistence of racial hierarchies even within spaces of resistance. Truman's attraction to Lynne, a white activist, reflects what Gauri Viswanathan (1989) describes as the "colonial mimicry" of values that privilege whiteness even in anticolonial contexts. Lynne, despite her progressive politics, embodies the figure of the white liberal who often gains symbolic capital in movements dominated by Black struggles. Meridian, by contrast, becomes a shadowed figure—valued less, desired less, her presence overshadowed by the whiteness that continues to dominate even radical spaces. This dynamic dramatizes what critical race theorists call the "permanence of racism": the idea that racial inequality is not an aberration but a fundamental feature of American social life (Bell, 1992). Walker thus shows how racism infiltrates even the most idealistic movements, perpetuating hierarchies that alienate Black women.

From a sociological perspective, the novel also reveals the ways in which race intersects with coloniality. The United States, though not a traditional colony by the mid, 20th century, nevertheless carried forward colonial logics of domination: the dispossession of Native Americans, the enslavement of Africans, and the economic exploitation of minorities. Scholars such as Aníbal Quijano (2000) have described this as the "coloniality of power," where colonial structures persist long after political independence, shaping identities, labor, and social relations. In Meridian, coloniality manifests in the way Black bodies are controlled, surveilled, and disciplined. Meridian's early life is shaped by racialized poverty; her activism exposes her to police violence and state repression. These experiences are not incidental but systemic, evidence that racial coloniality continues to structure American life. Walker's narrative, by situating individual struggles within these structures, invites readers to see race not as personal prejudice but as a system of domination that operates across generations.

At the psychological level, race produces feelings of inadequacy and internal conflict for Meridian. This aligns with Du Bois's concept of double consciousness. As a Black woman, Meridian is forced to see herself both through her own eyes and through the eyes of a white, dominated society that constantly devalues her. This produces a fractured identity: she feels guilt for failing to embody maternal ideals, shame for not fitting romantic norms, and isolation even within activist circles. Her double consciousness is intensified by gender, creating what sociologist Deborah King (1988) calls "multiple jeopardy"—the compounded effects of racism, sexism, and classism. Walker captures this complexity by portraying Meridian not as a heroic figure but as a fragile, conflicted individual whose psychological struggles mirror the structural weight of oppression. Her fainting spells and illnesses symbolize the crushing burden of living in a society where one's humanity is constantly questioned.

Yet Walker does not allow race to remain a site of despair alone. Instead, she depicts how confronting racial oppression can generate new forms of solidarity and resistance. Meridian's decision to nurture poor Black children, care for imprisoned activists, and teach rural communities reflects what bell hooks (1984) calls the "politics of love." For hooks, love is not sentimental but a radical political act that counters domination. By embodying this ethic,

Meridian transforms her racial alienation into communal care. Her struggle resonates with Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's insistence in *Decolonising the Mind* (1986) that decolonization must involve reclaiming cultural and spiritual identity. Meridian reclaims her identity not by denying race but by embracing it as the foundation of solidarity and survival. In this sense, Walker redefines Black womanhood as both vulnerable and powerful, scarred yet resilient.

The novel also critiques the way race is gendered within activism. Black women, though central to the Civil Rights Movement, were often sidelined by male leaders and overshadowed by white women activists. Meridian's marginalization within the movement reflects this historical reality. Sociologist Belinda Robnett (1997) has documented how Black women frequently served as "bridge leaders" in the Civil Rights Movement—organizing at the grassroots level, nurturing communities, and sustaining networks—yet were rarely recognized as official leaders. Meridian embodies this bridge role: she is the one who holds communities together, not through speeches or headlines but through everyday acts of care. Walker thus elevates the sociological significance of roles often ignored by historical accounts, insisting that racial justice movements cannot be understood without acknowledging the gendered labor of Black women.

Finally, race in *Meridian* is inseparable from memory and history. The protagonist's consciousness is haunted by the legacy of slavery and segregation. Her association of childbirth with slavery demonstrates how historical trauma continues to shape personal identity. This aligns with sociologist Avery Gordon's concept of "haunting," where unresolved histories of violence resurface in contemporary lives (Gordon, 1997, p. 8). Meridian's psychological struggles are not simply personal pathology but social hauntings—the afterlife of slavery, segregation, and systemic racism manifesting in the present. By narrating these hauntings, Walker makes visible what official histories often erase, humanizing sociological concepts by showing how the past lives on in bodies, memories, and relationships.

In conclusion, *Meridian* demonstrates how race functions as both a system of coloniality and a psychological burden. Through the lens of Fanon, Du Bois, Collins, and Hall, Walker's novel reveals the multiple dimensions of racial oppression: systemic, relational, and internal. Yet the novel also shows how confronting racial struggles can foster solidarity, resilience, and new forms of selfhood. Meridian Hill's psychological fragility is not a sign of weakness but a testimony to the crushing weight of racial oppression—and her continued commitment to activism despite this fragility is a radical act of defiance. In dramatizing these struggles, Walker contributes not only to African American literature but also to the sociology of race, offering a humanized narrative that bridges theory and lived experience.

5. Activism, Resistance, and Social Transformation

Alice Walker's *Meridian* situates activism not in spectacular marches or fiery speeches but in the quieter, often invisible labor of care, teaching, and endurance. This is one of the novel's most sociologically significant contributions: it expands the definition of resistance to include the everyday practices that sustain movements and nurture communities. While the Civil Rights and Black Power movements were often represented by male leaders like Martin Luther King Jr. or Malcolm X, Walker reminds us that the backbone of these movements was the grassroots labor of women like Meridian Hill. By focusing on Meridian's unconventional activism, the novel challenges traditional sociological models of resistance, showing that social transformation is as much about persistence, caregiving, and quiet defiance as it is about public confrontation.

From a Weberian perspective, Meridian's activism can be understood as a form of social action motivated not by instrumental rationality (seeking measurable success) but by value, rational commitments (Weber, 1947, p. 115). She does not engage in activism for recognition, reward, or even immediate results. Instead, she acts out of a deep moral conviction that justice and survival demand her participation. Max Weber distinguished between charismatic leaders, who inspire mass movements, and the "everyday actors," whose consistent participation sustains collective life. Meridian belongs to this second category. Her activism is not glamorous but deeply necessary, representing the kind of slow, enduring work without which revolutions collapse. By foregrounding Meridian's value, driven action, Walker emphasizes the moral dimension of resistance—activism as a vocation rather than a strategy.

James C. Scott's Weapons of the Weak (1985) provides another framework for interpreting Meridian's activism. Scott distinguishes between overt rebellions and "everyday resistance"—small, often invisible acts through which marginalized groups resist domination. Meridian's form of activism resembles this everyday resistance: teaching children in poor communities, comforting jailed protestors, and refusing to give up even when physically exhausted. These acts may appear minor compared to public demonstrations, but they carry profound sociological weight. They represent what Scott calls the "infrapolitics" of resistance—the hidden, persistent ways in which oppressed people undermine systems of domination (Scott, 1990, p. 183). In Meridian, Walker shows that these micro acts are not secondary to political struggle but central to its survival.

The novel also highlights the gendered nature of activism. Historically, women have often been the invisible laborers in social movements, providing logistical support, emotional care, and community organization while men occupied the spotlight. Sociologist Belinda Robnett (1997) introduced the concept of "bridge leadership" to describe the crucial role Black women played in the Civil Rights Movement: connecting grassroots communities with formal organizations, sustaining networks, and ensuring the daily functioning of movements. Meridian embodies this bridge role. She may not be the public face of the movement, but she is its moral and practical backbone. By valorizing Meridian's labor, Walker critiques historical narratives that privilege male leaders while overlooking the indispensable contributions of women. Her activism thus humanizes the sociology of social movements, shifting attention from the spectacular to the everyday.

Meridian's activism is also distinguished by its refusal of violence. At a time when the Black Power movement increasingly embraced militant rhetoric, Meridian insists on nonviolent, communal care. This commitment resonates with **Gandhian principles of satyagraha**, but Walker infuses it with womanist dimensions. Meridian's resistance is maternal and spiritual, not in the biological sense but in her ability to nurture communities through revolutionary love. Bell hooks (1984) has argued that love is a radical political act that counters domination and sustains resistance. Meridian embodies this politics of love, showing that activism is not merely about confrontation but about building alternative forms of community rooted in compassion. In sociological terms, her activism challenges the masculinist model of protest, offering instead a relational model that prioritizes care as a form of resistance.

At the same time, Walker does not romanticize activism. The novel reveals the toll it takes on Meridian's body and spirit. Her fainting spells, paralysis, and exhaustion signify the personal costs of political engagement. Sociologically, this reflects what Arlie Hochschild (1983) calls "emotional labor"—the often invisible emotional effort required to sustain social relations. Meridian's activism is not only physical but also emotional, involving constant care for others, patience in the face of hostility, and resilience in the absence of recognition. The toll on her

health highlights how movements depend on the unacknowledged sacrifices of individuals, particularly women. By making Meridian's suffering visible, Walker challenges sociologists to recognize the human costs of activism alongside its achievements.

Meridian's activism also underscores the tension between individual agency and structural constraints. As sociologist Anthony Giddens (1984) has argued in his theory of structuration, individuals are both constrained by social structures and capable of reproducing or transforming them through action. Meridian's activism illustrates this duality. On the one hand, she is constrained by poverty, racism, and gender roles. On the other, she exercises agency by reinterpreting motherhood, redefining activism, and resisting norms of femininity. Her everyday acts of resistance may not dismantle structures overnight, but they contribute to gradual social transformation. Walker's novel thus dramatizes the interplay of agency and structure, showing how individuals, even from marginal positions, can reshape the social order.

Importantly, Walker situates activism within a spiritual framework. Meridian's endurance is not fueled by ideology alone but by a profound sense of spiritual purpose. She often envisions herself as part of a larger moral struggle, imagining "all the people who are alone as I am will one day gather at the river" (Walker, 1976, p. 220). This vision recalls Durkheim's notion of *collective effervescence*, where individuals experience a sense of transcendence through participation in collective rituals (Durkheim, 1912/1995, p. 217). For Meridian, activism becomes a ritual of care, a spiritual practice that connects her to others and to something greater than herself. This spiritual dimension underscores Walker's womanist philosophy, which integrates political struggle with spiritual wholeness. In doing so, *Meridian* challenges sociologists to consider how activism is not only political but also profoundly existential and spiritual.

The novel also raises questions about the efficacy of activism. Unlike traditional narratives that culminate in victory or defeat, Meridian ends ambiguously. The protagonist continues her work, not because she expects immediate transformation, but because she believes in the moral necessity of resistance. This reflects what Howard Zinn (1994) called the "infinite succession of presents," where the significance of activism lies not in its final outcomes but in the meaning it brings to the present moment of struggle. Meridian's activism, though modest, sustains communities, nurtures resilience, and preserves hope. From a sociological standpoint, this challenges teleological models of social change that measure success only by structural shifts. Instead, it highlights the micro, level transformations—care, solidarity, dignity—that constitute the fabric of social transformation.

In contemporary terms, Meridian's activism resonates with ongoing debates about sustainable resistance. Movements like Black Lives Matter have emphasized decentralized leadership, community care, and intersectional justice—values that echo Meridian's womanist activism. By placing care at the center of resistance, Walker anticipates current sociological insights that recognize the importance of affect, embodiment, and relationality in social movements (Goodwin, Jasper, & Polletta, 2001). Meridian's activism thus bridges past and present, offering a model of resistance that is at once practical, spiritual, and deeply human.

In sum, *Meridian* redefines activism as a sociological practice rooted in care, endurance, and everyday resistance. Through Weber, Scott, Robnett, hooks, and others, we can see Meridian's activism not as secondary to "real" politics but as essential to the survival of movements and communities. Her resistance humanizes sociology by showing that activism is not only about structural change but about the daily, often invisible practices that sustain human dignity. By

embodying this ethic, Meridian transforms resistance from a strategy into a way of life—a life that, though fraught with pain, becomes a testament to the possibility of social transformation.

6. Intersectionality, Intra, Movement Conflict, and Gendered Exclusions

One of the most striking aspects of Alice Walker's Meridian is its unflinching portrayal of intra, movement tensions and the gendered exclusions that shaped the Civil Rights and Black Power movements. While mainstream narratives of these movements often celebrate unity and collective struggle, Walker draws attention to the conflicts within: between men and women, between Black activists and their white allies, and between those who pursued visibility and those who practiced quieter forms of resistance. By dramatizing these conflicts, Walker anticipates and enriches sociological debates on intersectionality, intra, movement hierarchies, and the politics of exclusion.

The concept of intersectionality, coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), provides a crucial lens for understanding Meridian Hill's marginalization. Crenshaw argued that Black women are disadvantaged not only by racism and sexism separately but by their intersection, which produces unique forms of discrimination often overlooked by both feminist and anti, racist frameworks. In Meridian, this intersectional marginalization is palpable. Black male activists view women primarily as supportive figures, while white women activists like Lynne often receive more attention and legitimacy than Black women. Meridian finds herself doubly excluded: sidelined by gender within Black spaces, and by race within feminist or interracial spaces. Her experience dramatizes the sociological insight that oppression is multidimensional, and cannot be reduced to a single axis.

Walker portrays these exclusions with remarkable nuance. Truman Held, Meridian's lover and comrade, illustrates how even radical Black men reproduced patriarchal norms within the movement. Truman expects Meridian to embody traditional femininity—nurturing, sexually available, and supportive— while pursuing his own political ambitions. When he turns to Lynne, a white activist, the racial dynamics of gendered desire become stark. Lynne is exoticized and valorized in ways that obscure Meridian's contributions. This resonates with sociologist Frances Beale's concept of "double jeopardy," where Black women face the compounded oppressions of race and gender (Beale, 1970, p. 90). For Meridian, the betrayal is not only personal but political, exposing how patriarchal and racial hierarchies infiltrated even spaces that claimed to resist domination.

The tensions between Black women and white women in Meridian also reflect long, standing debates in feminist sociology. White women activists like Lynne often enter Black struggles with genuine passion but also with unexamined privilege. Their ability to leave the movement, retreat to safer lives, or be celebrated as symbols of solidarity underscores the racial inequalities embedded in activism. Gwendolyn Simmons (1998) has noted that during the Civil Rights Movement, white women often gained disproportionate visibility compared to the Black women who carried the day, to, day burdens of organizing. Walker illustrates this dynamic through Lynne, whose presence unsettles Meridian not only because of personal jealousy but because it reveals how whiteness continues to dominate even radical spaces. The novel thus demonstrates how intersectionality operates not only at the level of identity but also within social movements, shaping hierarchies of recognition and legitimacy.

These gendered exclusions within the movement also raise questions about leadership. As sociologist Belinda Robnett (1997) documented, Black women often functioned as "bridge leaders"—connecting communities, sustaining grassroots networks, and nurturing solidarity—yet their roles were overshadowed by the charismatic leadership of men. Meridian epitomizes

this bridge role: she sustains the movement through her care work, teaching, and community engagement. Yet she remains invisible in the historical narrative, unrecognized as a leader. Walker's novel thus critiques the sociology of social movements, which has often privileged overt forms of leadership while neglecting the indispensable labor of women. By centering Meridian, Walker insists that resistance cannot be fully understood without acknowledging these gendered dynamics.

The intra, movement conflicts in Meridian also reflect broader sociological theories of power. Michel Foucault (1977) reminds us that power is not simply repressive but productive; it circulates within movements as well as institutions. In the Civil Rights Movement, power was exercised not only by the state but also within activist organizations, where decisions about visibility, leadership, and recognition often reinforced existing hierarchies. Walker captures this subtle circulation of power in the way men marginalize women's voices, or how white activists overshadow Black women. Meridian's invisibility, then, is not accidental but a product of these intra, movement power dynamics. Her refusal to seek recognition can be read as both survival and resistance: by stepping outside the politics of visibility, she creates space for a different ethic of activism rooted in care rather than hierarchy.

Another layer of conflict arises in the generational tensions Walker portrays. Younger activists, often impatient with nonviolent methods, embrace militant rhetoric and direct confrontation. Meridian, however, remains committed to nonviolence and to the slow work of community care. This generational conflict reflects what Aldon Morris (1984) described as the "movement halfway houses" of the Civil Rights era, where different ideological and tactical approaches coexisted uneasily. Meridian's choice to prioritize grassroots care over militancy positions her at odds with the more masculinist visions of resistance. Yet Walker valorizes her path, suggesting that social transformation requires not only confrontation with external enemies but also the nurturing of internal resilience. This challenges sociological models of social movements that equate effectiveness with visibility and militancy, offering instead a model where sustainability and care are central.

Intersectionality in Meridian also operates at the psychological level. Meridian internalizes the guilt and alienation produced by exclusion, manifesting in her physical illnesses and emotional isolation. This reflects what Patricia Hill Collins (2000) describes as the "outsider, within" status of Black women intellectuals and activists: simultaneously part of movements and yet marginalized within them. Meridian embodies this outsider, within position, never fully embraced by her community or by the movement, yet indispensable to both. Her persistence despite exclusion demonstrates what resilience looks like when oppression operates on multiple fronts. This resilience is not triumphant but weary, marked by sacrifice and endurance. In humanizing this intersectional struggle, Walker challenges celebratory narratives of activism and replaces them with a more complex, embodied sociology of resistance.

The novel also dramatizes the costs of these exclusions for movement sustainability. When Black women like Meridian are marginalized, the movement itself becomes impoverished. Their absence from leadership and visibility deprives movements of perspectives that are essential for addressing the full spectrum of oppression. This insight resonates with Angela Davis's (1981) argument in *Women, Race, and Class*, where she insists that the liberation of Black women is not peripheral but central to the liberation of all. Meridian's marginalization is thus not only her personal struggle but a sociological commentary on the limitations of movements that fail to fully include women. By showing the cracks within the Civil Rights Movement, Walker suggests that intersectional solidarity is not optional but necessary for true transformation.

Finally, Walker's portrayal of intra, movement conflict humanizes sociology by showing how exclusion is lived. For Meridian, exclusion is not an abstract theory but a visceral experience: the sting of being overlooked, the loneliness of carrying burdens without recognition, the pain of seeing her contributions erased. These human experiences dramatize the sociological insight that movements are not only collective structures but also deeply personal. Activism shapes and scars individual lives, leaving psychological and bodily traces. By centering Meridian's perspective, Walker brings to light the human costs of intersectional exclusion, ensuring that sociology does not remain abstract but grounded in lived realities.

In conclusion, Meridian reveals that the struggles for racial justice were complicated by intra, movement conflicts and gendered exclusions. Through the lens of intersectionality, Walker shows how Black women bore the brunt of multiple oppressions, often unrecognized and undervalued within the very movements they sustained. Yet the novel also reveals the resilience of these women, who continued to resist and nurture despite exclusion. By dramatizing these dynamics, Walker contributes not only to literature but also to sociology, offering a nuanced analysis of power, hierarchy, and solidarity within social movements. Meridian Hill stands as both a victim of exclusion and a testament to the necessity of intersectional struggle for genuine transformation.

CONCLUSION

7. Sociology of Selfhood, Womanism, and Contemporary Relevance

Alice Walker's Meridian is more than a novel of personal struggle; it is a sociological meditation on race, gender, class, and activism in twentieth, century America. By centering the story of Meridian Hill—a woman fragile in body but resolute in spirit—Walker reframes the Civil Rights and Black Power movements through the eyes of those most often overlooked: Black women whose quiet endurance and radical care made transformation possible. This perspective allows the novel to illuminate not only the history of social movements but also enduring sociological themes of alienation, identity, and collective resistance.

At its core, *Meridian* interrogates the sociology of selfhood. Meridian's journey is marked by alienation from her community, estrangement from traditional roles of womanhood, and dislocation within the very movement she supports. Her fainting spells and illnesses signify what Marx (1844/1978) called *alienation*: the estrangement of individuals from their own humanity under oppressive systems. Yet Meridian's alienation is not only economic but also cultural and psychological, reflecting the intersectional burdens she carries as a Black woman in a racist, patriarchal society. Through her struggles, Walker dramatizes how selfhood is socially constructed and fractured, revealing the human costs of systemic oppression. At the same time, Meridian's persistence shows that selfhood can also be reclaimed, redefined through solidarity, and sustained by moral conviction. Her life embodies a sociology of resilience: fragile yet enduring, broken yet whole.

Walker's vision is deeply informed by womanist thought, which she later defined as a commitment to the survival and wholeness of all people, male and female (Walker, 1983, p. xi). Unlike strands of feminism that sometimes-foregrounded individual autonomy at the expense of community, womanism insists on relationality, spirituality, and inclusivity. Meridian exemplifies this ethic. She rejects the narrowly defined role of biological motherhood but embraces a broader, communal motherhood that nurtures the oppressed. She refuses patriarchal definitions of femininity yet remains deeply invested in the survival of her people. Her activism, though understated, embodies what bell hooks (2000) described as a "love ethic":

a radical commitment to justice expressed through care. In this sense, Meridian's womanism bridges the personal and the political, showing how identity and activism can merge into a holistic practice of survival and transformation.

Sociologically, *Meridian* also challenges dominant models of social movements. Traditional theories often emphasize charismatic leadership, visible protests, and structural outcomes. Walker shifts the lens to everyday resistance, emotional labor, and the invisible contributions of women. By doing so, she anticipates contemporary sociological approaches that highlight affect, embodiment, and intersectionality in collective action (Goodwin, Jasper, & Polletta, 2001). Meridian's activism—teaching children, comforting prisoners, caring for the poor—shows that social transformation is not only achieved through grand gestures but through small, consistent acts of solidarity. This reframing challenges us to broaden our understanding of resistance and recognize the many forms through which oppressed communities sustain themselves.

The novel also underscores the necessity of intersectionality for genuine liberation. As Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) argued, movements that ignore the intersection of race and gender risk reproducing the very oppressions they seek to dismantle. Meridian's marginalization within both Black and feminist spaces reveals the limitations of single, axis politics. Her story insists that justice must be intersectional, attentive to the compounded oppressions faced by Black women. This insight remains profoundly relevant today. Movements like Black Lives Matter, led largely by Black women and queer activists, embody the intersectional vision Walker dramatized decades earlier. In this sense, Meridian is not only a reflection on past struggles but a prophetic text that speaks to ongoing battles for racial, gender, and social justice.

The psychological struggles Meridian faces—her illnesses, guilt, and feelings of inadequacy—also resonate with contemporary sociological insights about trauma and resilience. Avery Gordon's (1997) concept of "haunting" captures how unresolved histories of slavery and segregation resurface in the present. Meridian's association of childbirth with slavery, her bodily breakdowns, and her emotional alienation are forms of social haunting: the afterlife of historical violence inscribed on individual lives. Yet Walker does not leave her protagonist trapped in trauma. Instead, she depicts how Meridian transforms her suffering into activism, reclaiming agency in the very space of alienation. This transformation illustrates what sociologists call post, traumatic growth: the capacity to find meaning, resilience, and new forms of life in the aftermath of trauma (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Walker thus humanizes sociological concepts by showing how they unfold in lived experience.

Walker's narrative also engages with decolonial thought. Scholars like Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) have argued that decolonization requires not only political independence but also cultural reclamation, the rejection of colonial definitions of self. Meridian embodies this process of decolonization. She rejects the colonial imposition of motherhood as enslavement, resists patriarchal definitions of femininity, and refuses to measure her worth by the standards of recognition set by white society or even male activists. Her activism represents a reclamation of cultural and spiritual identity rooted in community survival. By dramatizing this decolonial process, Walker connects African American struggles to global anticolonial movements, situating *Meridian* within a transnational sociology of resistance.

The contemporary relevance of *Meridian* cannot be overstated. In an era marked by systemic racism, reproductive injustice, and social inequality, Walker's insights remain urgent. Debates around reproductive rights echo Meridian's struggles with motherhood, highlighting the continued policing of women's bodies. The invisibility of women's labor in social movements

persists, making Meridian's bridge leadership a critical model for contemporary organizing. The psychological burdens of racism, sexism, and trauma continue to shape lives, reminding us that social justice must address not only structures but also the emotional and bodily dimensions of oppression. Walker's novel speaks to these realities with remarkable prescience, offering both critique and hope.

Ultimately, *Meridian* humanizes sociology. By embedding abstract theories of alienation, intersectionality, coloniality, and resistance within the story of a single woman, Walker bridges the gap between theory and lived experience. The novel reminds us that sociology is not only about structures and systems but also about people—their bodies, emotions, and stories. Meridian Hill, fragile yet resilient, alienated yet committed, embodies the paradoxes of oppressed existence and the possibilities of transformative resistance. Her life illustrates that social change is not only about victories in the public sphere but about the quieter, everyday acts of care that sustain communities and nurture hope.

In closing, Walker's *Meridian* offers a sociological vision that is at once critical and humanistic. It critiques the exclusions, hierarchies, and oppressions that plague social movements while affirming the resilience, love, and endurance that make survival possible. It situates individual suffering within collective histories, showing how trauma becomes a site of resistance. And it redefines activism as a holistic practice that integrates care, spirituality, and solidarity. For scholars of sociology, literature, and social justice, *Meridian* remains a vital text, offering lessons not only about the past but also about how we might imagine more inclusive, humane, and resilient futures.

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