

DEALING WITH RACIAL DISCRIMINATION: EXPLORING THE COPING STRATEGIES UTILISED BY THE PROTAGONIST IN ALICE WALKER'S *MERIDIAN*

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ABSTRACT

Combating, eliminating and dealing with racial discrimination is not an easy undertaking. The historical and social-political space in which it is embedded somewhat intensifies its complexity. However, communal and individual efforts ought to be made in a bid to reduce and eradicate this negative issue. Drawing on Alice Walker's *Meridian*, this article attempts to explore racial discrimination and the utilisation of coping strategies to deal with this problematic issue in the aforementioned novel. The stress and coping theory is central in the analysis as it provides insights into the specific coping strategies utilised by the main character in this narrative. Textual analysis was conducted anchored on the stress and coping theory during the collection of data and a thematic analysis was rendered afterwards. The principal findings of this research are that, *Meridian* utilises emotion focused, avoidance and problem focused strategies to deal with the recurring issue of racial discrimination. The wide range of strategies deployed enable her to cope, press on and deal with the various race-oriented challenges she encounters, highlighting the significance of individuals acquainting themselves with strategies of this nature.

Keywords: *Race, racism, racial discrimination, coping strategies, Meridian.*

INTRODUCTION

Representations of racial discrimination in literary works can be said to be unavoidable and inevitable due to the recurring manifestation of racial issues in society. Racial discrimination is one of the most problematic human rights and global issues. Even though finding an all-encompassing definition is somewhat tricky, racial discrimination is and can be regarded as the mistreatment of a person or persons because of their perceived race or ethnic group (Haeny, Holmes and Williams, 2021)

Treating someone unfavorably because he/she is of a certain race, ethnicity or because of personal characteristics associated with race such as hair texture, skin color, language or certain facial features all falls in the wider bracket of racial discrimination. Racial discrimination can be; deliberate or unintentional, direct or indirect, individual or institutional, in the form of harassment or in the form of victimisation. Further, it could manifest as perceived racial discrimination where one is discriminated against because people think that he or she belongs to a group of people who are identified by their race, colour, nationality, and citizenship, ethnic or national origins. Pettigrew and Taylor (2000), also point out that racial discrimination exists in straightforward

actions but also in complex systems of social relations that produce racial inequalities in social outcomes.

The effects and negative ramifications of racial discrimination are numerous. Lower well-being, greater anger, higher depressive symptoms and poorer health outcomes are some notable negative outcomes (Cox, Toussaint and Woerner, 2023). Race-related discrimination also has the capacity and propensity to exclude others from the full enjoyment of their political, civic, economic, social or cultural right, leading to negative states. This is why people ought to be protected against discrimination of this nature and equipped to deal with discrimination in all social and public domains which include among others; contracts, education, employment, goods, housing, membership in groups, services and vocational associations.

Literary works can, do and must also play an active role in countering racial discrimination by reflecting and addressing this issue through narratives. This paper argues that race, racism and racial discrimination are major issues in Alice Walker's *Meridian*, the protagonist in the novel experiences racial discrimination and deploys various coping strategies to deal with racism. "Deal" in this context does not just refer to taking measures concerning someone or something but also the resolve to challenge, counter and combat something.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The Stress and Coping theory

In an attempt to explore the utilisation of coping strategies in dealing with racial discrimination, the study relies on the Stress and Coping Theory. Haan (1977) states that coping is a mature and positive defence mechanism thus it can be utilised to deal with unpleasant feelings, experiences and situations. According to Cramer (1987), coping strategies can be dubbed as adaptational processes that involve purpose, choice and flexible shift. The coping process happens consciously hence it is modifiable, amenable to changes and potential intervention.

Lazarus and Folkman are foundational figures in the propagation of this theory, they developed the classic model of coping that is multiculturally adapted and used as a theoretical base in various areas. The coping process or response is categorised and explained in terms of problem-focused coping or emotion-focused coping strategies, also referred to as active and passive coping strategies. These along with avoidance are also referred to as types of coping strategies.

It is argued that individuals who are faced with challenges appraise them primarily and secondarily. Primary appraisal is where the individual assesses the challenge and gauges if it is either threatening or non-threatening while secondary appraisal refers to the individual assessing the challenge in terms of whether he or she has the resources to respond to it or cope with the challenge effectively. If one does not believe that they have the capacity to respond to the challenge or feels a lack of control, he or she is most likely to transition to emotion-based coping strategies. Emotion based coping involves regulation of the emotions connected with the stressor and may include reappraising the event to create positive meaning or escape-avoidance in which one tries not to think of events or uses a behaviour to try to make himself or herself feel better. On the other hand, if one has resources or the capacity to manage the challenge, they will usually develop or resort to problem-focused coping strategies. Problem-focused coping is aimed at dealing with the challenge by changing or tackling it; it involves strategies used to deal with the stressor itself and may include such strategies as making a plan of action and following it. Lastly, there is avoidance,

the type of coping strategy that can be understood as denial where the individual tries to deal with the problem, stressor or challenge by forgetting (Lazarus and Folkman, 1985).

Another cardinal aspect of coping is that how individuals appraise a stressor, problem, challenge or difficulty will determine how they will attempt to cope with it. Recent research has shown that positive, problem focused strategies have been related to better outcomes whereas negative, avoidant strategies have been associated with greater difficulties thus it is cardinal that individuals familiarise themselves with these strategies (Altshuler & Ruble, 1989). Focusing on coping strategies, Folkman and Lazarus (1984) define them as individual efforts to resolve, manage, deal with, alleviate or endure problems or experienced stress; these efforts could be both behavioral and psychological.

It is also important to note and mention that Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) model has been used as a basis for conceptualising race related stress and problems by various researchers (Outlaw, 1993). Considering the observation that characters in *Meridian* are exposed to racial discrimination and are subject to; negative based attitudes (prejudice), race based belief and opinions (stereotypes), race-related events (situations) and unfair treatment on the basis of race (discrimination), the coping strategies theory is appropriate, relevant and it will help as it is a frame from which to identify how characters cope with racial discrimination. In the same way that racism is conceptualised and perceived as a stressor, racial discrimination which can be dubbed as an aspect of racism can be labeled as a stressor requiring coping strategies (Mwansa, 2023). Thus, the coping theory will be instrumental in investigating and analyzing the various strategies utilised by the protagonist in Alice Walker's *Meridian*.

COPING STRATEGIES EMPLOYED BY MERIDIAN

Emotion focussed

The first type of coping strategy that Meridian employs in dealing with racial discrimination is emotion focussed coping. According to Ogden (2004), this type of coping strategy can involve the use of *Dealing with Racial Discrimination: Exploring the Coping Strategies Utilised by the Protagonist in Alice Walker's Meridian* behavioural or cognitive strategies when one faces a problem, difficulty or stressful events. Examples of emotion focussed coping include: wishful thinking, distracting oneself, seeking comfort from others, working on emotions by using anger to release tension, emotional distancing, drug or alcohol abuse, seeking emotional support and religious support or engaging in religious activities.

One of the emotion-focused coping strategies that Meridian uses is seeking religious support. It is worth mentioning that Meridian is not portrayed as a religious person though her mother is devoutly religious. A behavior that is contrary to Parsons and Bales (1956) who assert that religion is an essential agent of socialisation and children tend to develop or rather adhere to the same religious beliefs as their parents. When Meridian is young, she refuses to accept the church and this angers her mother who hopes she will give her life to God:

Say it now Meridian and be saved. All he asks is that we acknowledge him as our master. Say you believe in Him. Looking at her daughter's tears: Don't go against your heart but she had sat mute, watching her friends walking past her bench, accepting Christ, acknowledging God as their master, Jesus their savior

and her heart fluttered like that of a small bird about to be stoned (Walker, 1976, pp. 14-15).

This passage reveals Meridian's reluctance to commit her life to God and it also highlights her dislike for religious activities as she does not want to associate with church in the same way that her mother does. Even when she goes to Saxon college, Meridian openly states that she does not believe that there is God. In fact, her circles of friends at college have no regard for church and any religious activities. However, due to the unending racial discrimination that Meridian experiences and witnesses, a time comes when she seeks religious support as a way of responding and coping. The writer highlights that she starts going to different churches for several weeks till finally she finds herself in a church that changes her perception of the then black churches.

Realising that the church is a place of communal spirit, togetherness and righteous convergence, she comments that: 'Perhaps, it was, after all, the only place left for the black people to congregate, where problems of life were not discussed fraudulently and the approach to the future was considered communally and moral questions were taken seriously' (Walker, 1976, p. 195-196). It can be deduced that the religious support that Meridian sees and experiences helps her to cope with racism as the church has a shared history, people there have the same values and a common heritage. This can be seen when the members strengthen the father of a slain Martyr in the civil rights struggle, they emphasise on solidarity and fighting racial oppression together as a black community.

Other than seeking religious support, Meridian also utilises wishful thinking which is an emotion focussed coping strategy. This is where an individual thinks and wishes he or she could change or stop what they are experiencing. It must be pointed out that Meridian lives in a sexist and racist society, a society in which a woman is expected to be subordinate and submissive to men. Furthermore, the social ladder suggests that below the white man, is the white woman. The black man is below the white woman and at the bottom of the black man is the black woman thus Meridian and her fellow women are portrayed to be at the bottom of the social ladder (Tembo, 2009). While at Saxon College, Meridian is a victim of racial discrimination and sexism. There are some instances when she is taken advantage of because of her gender and race, a common phenomenon in Alice Walker's novels.

Mr Raymonds, a University Professor who Meridian works for often makes sexual advances towards her. An experience that traumatises her and vividly makes her unhappy. This can be observed when Truman asks her if the professor hobbles her around the desk. She tells Truman that he does not but as she recalls and thinks through, it becomes evident that the Professor does hobble her. Walker (1976, p. 103) writes: 'Yes Mr Raymond did limp her around the desk. And what was more and worse, he caught her. But she knew Truman would never understand. She had hardly understood and believed it herself, at first. The reader gets to learn that Meridian wishes she could do something about Mr Raymond's racist and sexist attitude but her dependence on him for school expenses and other needs silences her thus she endures the oppression and she can only adopt the coping strategy of wishful thinking. Meridian's continual struggles corroborate well with Suresh and Anuradha (2018) who observe that black women have always been part of literature and men have endeavoured to dominate them socially and sexually.

It is for this reason that coping strategies should be employed to minimise and deal with gender and race based discrimination.

Problem Focussed Strategies

Problem focussed coping is the second strategy that Meridian uses to cope with racial discrimination. According to Folkman and Lazarus (1985) problem focussed coping is an adaptive mode of coping that involves actively planning and engaging in a specific behaviour to overcome the problem or challenge that one faces. One can use various problem focussed strategies, some of which include: planning or suppression of competing activities, making an indirect or direct response, finding out more information about the issue, evaluating the negatives and positives within a given situation and learning new skills to manage, master, change or eliminate the problem, stressor or challenge.

Meridian responds and deals with racial discrimination using problem focussed strategies by being active in the struggle against the oppression of the black community. When she learns of the bombings that take place at the house where voter registration is to take place, the cruel racial act bothers her and she seeks to be a participant (Walker, 1976). Meridian plans to be a volunteer, she joins and shows willingness to learn new skills like typing and tries to be of aid in any possible way as she believes that the movement is capable of dealing with the problem of racial discrimination that the local blacks constantly face.

Meridian is also active in responding to racial discrimination by devoting herself to the work of being an activist; she participates in demonstrations and protests in a bid to achieve political, economic and social equality for the blacks. Her efforts do not go unnoticed as the local blacks appreciate and sympathise with her: 'The Majority of black townspeople were sympathetic to the movement from the first and told Meridian she was doing a good thing: typing, teaching illiterates to read and write, demonstrating against segregated facilities and keeping the movement house open when the other workers returned to school' (Walker, 1976, p. 74).

According to Esty (2006), problem focused strategies are often employed when one sees racist events as changeable or highly stressing. Meridian is optimistic that racial discrimination would come to an end someday thus she resolves to continue canvassing, protesting and demonstrating. This explains why she is always preoccupied with the civil rights movement even when her mother disapproves and is unsympathetic with the activists. In her second year at Saxon college, Meridian joins the Atlanta movement and Walker (1976, p. 85-86) highlights why: 'She found it impossible to study while others were being beaten and jailed. It was also, surprisingly, an escape for her. After her friendship with Annie Marion, they marched often together and would go to jail with their toothbrushes and books and cigarettes under their arms'. As earlier stated, problem focused strategies are used when one appraises a problem as being highly stressful and frustrating. It is evident that Meridian is stressed and frustrated by racial discrimination thus she endeavours to cope with the racial oppression, discrimination and abuse by being actively involved in protests and demonstrations.

Avoidance Coping Strategy

Turning to avoidance coping strategy, it is the type of coping strategy one uses to reduce stress, anger or frustration related to an event or an experience by forgetting, distancing or distracting him or herself from it. Individuals often use this strategy when they appraise an event as distressful and when it is not perceived as changeable (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). Meridian utilises this strategy after the Wild Child's death. It is Meridian who tries to transform and help the Wild Child before she dies thus, she is affected by the death of the vulnerable girl. However, what stresses her

most is the institutional racism she experiences at Saxon College in relation to the Wild Child. Firstly, she is prohibited from keeping the Wild Child at the campus and secondly, Meridian and other students are not allowed to use the chapel services for the Wild Child's funeral. This racially motivated discriminatory event affects Meridian and the other black students. Walker (1976. p. 88-89) writes:

After the Wild Child's death she could not live on campus, although she continued to attend classes, and lived instead in the ghetto that surrounded it. It was a poor community but friendly and very calm'. In order to pay her rent and to buy other

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items that one needed at a school like Saxon-tennis racket, bathing suit, ballet slippers and tights, etc.-she went to work as a typist for a professor who had recently retired and whose office was a few blocks from her door.

This excerpt from the story is evidence that Meridian uses avoidance coping strategy after being unable to bear the racism she witnesses and experiences at Saxon college. It can be noted that she perceives the institutional racism as unchangeable thus, she resorts to distancing herself from the campus and opts to live outside campus despite the costs. Distancing herself from the college is Meridian's way of avoiding, reducing and overcoming the anger, anxiety and sadness that emanates from the racist events that occur at Saxon College. From what has been highlighted and discussed above, it is vivid that Alice Walker's Protagonist in *Meridian* deploys a wide range of strategies to deal with racial discrimination.

CONCLUSION

This paper sought to explore representations of racial discrimination and the coping strategies utilised by the main character to deal with racial discrimination in Alice Walker's novel 'Meridian'. Alice Walker vividly depicts segregation, sexism and racial discrimination. Issues that the youthful people in the text endeavour to counter, combat and challenge.

The findings of this study are that Meridian, the protagonist utilises avoidance coping strategies, emotion focussed strategies and problem focused strategies. It can be argued that she uses emotion focussed and avoidance focussed strategies because of how she appraises certain racist events. This resonates well with Altushuler and Rubles (1989) who suggests that the coping strategies are determined by the way individuals appraise challenges, demands and stressors. When Meridian uses avoidance strategy, she appraises the situations to be stressful hence she endeavours to reduce and avoid the effects of racial discrimination. As pointed out, Meridian opts to distance herself from Saxon College after experiencing the perpetual racial segregation and discrimination. Moving to another place where she was less likely to directly witness and experience racial discrimination was a way of dealing with the racial stress and trauma as the treatment of blacks like the wild child greatly affected her. In a nutshell, distancing and distracting oneself is a practical avoidance coping strategy that Meridian utilises.

Turning to emotion focussed coping strategies, it can also be pointed out that Meridian appraises racial issues in her space as plausible sources of stress thus, she endeavors to deal with

them. Commenting on the process of appraising, Ogden (2004) points out that when an individual appraises an event as being potentially stressful, the coping strategy is elicited. Meridian employs emotion focussed strategies by seeking social support. This emotion focussed strategy helps Meridian to reduce the stress, tension and anger levels experienced due to racial discrimination. This finding is in agreement with Brannon and Fiest (2007) who also found that appraising involves the categorising and evaluating of a problem to ascertain whether the problem is a stressor, a threat or challenge.

As regards, the utilisation of problem focussed strategies, it is vivid that the protagonist lives in a somewhat civilised society where she is socialised to deal with racial issues thus, she employs less destructive strategies like being a civil rights worker. The civil rights movement was one of the main agents of fighting racial discrimination, oppression and segregation. The blacks in Meridian's time responded to racism by protesting and demonstrating hence she was also active in this problem focussed strategy. Voter registration was another common activity that the oppressed blacks carried out as they hoped that they could put an end to racial discrimination by voting for equality. Walker narrates how there was a voter registration drive in Meridian's neighbourhood, a civil rights movement at her school and how Tommy odds convinced other black people to register to vote as emphasis was placed on the liberation effects of voting (Walker, 1976). Canvassing required planning, basic skills and the belief that it would make a difference someday thus Meridian employed these problem-focussed strategies as they were the prevalent ways of coping with racism. Suffice to state that coping strategies are significant and useful in coping with racial discrimination as they help individuals to: avoid unpleasant environments and situations, promote a sense of security and togetherness when one has difficulties, enable individuals to defend their customs and they ignite optimism as one endeavours to cope with problems. Considering racial discrimination is a complex issue that can impose burdens on others, injure others and limit their access of available benefits, there is need for concerted and united efforts in dealing with it. At a global and national level, there is need for the reconstruction of policies that scapegoat and subject others to disproportionate, discriminatory or differential treatment. Technologically, collective actions via social media must also be utilised to aid in combating the persistent challenge of racial discrimination (Tao *et al.*, 2024) At individual level, there is need for the utilisation of positive coping strategies, resilience, and continued efforts to counter racial discrimination and any other discriminatory issues.

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