

# Motherhood, Political, and Sexual in Alice Walker's Novel the Meridian

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**Abstract-** Walker's second novel *Meridian*, which presents a balanced picture of black Womanhood. It openly mirrors the black woman's experiences of exploitation – political, racial, sexual and emotional - and then envisages her total freedom through her pursuit of her wholeness as a human being. The novel vividly creates an image of the African-American woman with her complexity, diversity and depth. *Meridian* is Walker's most explicitly and narrowly a "political" novel. It exposes the gap between the official claims of American democracy and the state's exploitative and repressive practices. The novel is critical of sexism within the civil rights movement. For example, *Meridian* subordinates the struggle within gender to the "larger" questions raised by the imminent exhaustion or depletion of the movement itself.

**Index terms-** womanhood, sexual, political, civil rights movement, motherhood violence

## I. INTRODUCTION

*Meridian's* theory of "One Life" dissolves the barriers of class and education between herself and the black community at large and effectively depoliticizes the struggle with the movement's patriarchal values and practices by locating the "personal" problems of sexism within the nationalist project. *Meridian* is a maturation novel-an examination of *Meridian's* growth, her movement into womanhood and her emergence as a strong woman. Walker makes her protagonist undertake a lonely pilgrimage that encompasses elements of initiation, renunciation, atonement and release. Throughout the book the liberating goal of the pilgrimage is emphasized by symbols and images related to slavery and freedom. The quest is for self-knowledge, for wholeness that leads to transcendence, as *Meridian* finally discovers herself and her relationship to the world at large. Walker presents a cultural context in which

motherhood becomes a vehicle for rebellion for *Meridian*. She employs two frames: the outer frame demonstrates that the culture gives women few alternatives to the suffocation and sacrifice of traditional wifehood and motherhood.

## TEXT

*Walker's* second novel is about the female protagonist of the same name who is gradually awakened from her subordinate status as a black female, daughter, wife and mother to her own self and tries to become the maternal provider of the larger black community. *Meridian* understands what it is to be a mother by knowing her own mother and then again by becoming the mother of Eddie's child. Mrs. Hill, the mother of *Meridian*, marries Mr. Hill not out of love, but to appease the community. She is not interested in having children. Like Mr. Hill she is a school teacher. Mr. Hill is quiet, clean and sincere. He is dreamy but ambitious. In the very first pregnancy, Mrs. Hill becomes distracted from what she was. She understands that she has lost her frail independence to the pressures of motherhood and learns that she is entrapped and that her personal life was over. She wants to go back to teaching but fails in doing so because she cannot pass new exams and does not like the new generation of students. Having learned to follow others rather than following herself she indoctrinates *Meridian*, her daughter, in such things that she herself does not believe. *Meridian* knows that her mother is not a woman to have children. She feels bad about stealing away her mother's serenity, and her emerging self. Pamela E. Barnett, opines that, *she keeps Meridian in a state of ignorance and denies her a chance for a better life (127)*. It only perpetuates the general ignorance so pervasive in the black community.

In her school days Meridian falls in the company of Eddie who initiates her into sexual life, resulting in her pregnancy. They marry secretly. However, Meridian's mother never teaches her the meanings of married life. In fact like her mother, Meridian is not interested in sex. Even before marriage, she is, seduced by mulatto called George Dexter. Even Dexter's assistant thinks that she is like a toy as she is black.

Meridian's endless suspicion about Eddie only serves to highlight her growing cynicism. Basically, Meridian wants to give some meaning to her life as an individual. She is awakened to her true self the moment she learns about the Civil Rights Movement. Trapped in her own lethargy and lack of direction, Meridian has no idea how to break through her stasis. A bomb blast does what the community and the family have failed to do. Provoked by this violence she longs to become a volunteer.

Her participation in the Civil Rights Movement gets her a scholarship sponsored by a generous and wealthy white man in Connecticut. Professor Truman is a staunch supporter of black people's rights, and an advocate of protecting the virtue of black women from the White. However, in his private life, he oppresses the black women as much as the whites do. Meridian somehow makes compromises and coexists with him. In her quest for self-fulfilment and identity, she joins with him.

When Truman starts dating Lynne, Meridian feels ashamed of herself as she is black. She cannot understand Truman's preference for a white girl: *It was strange and unfair, but the fact that he dated them obviously because their color made him drawn towards them (129)*. This leads Meridian to search her soul and reevaluate her blackness and her femininity. She tries to remember everything that she can about white women.

Meridian and Truman continue to love. Her pregnancy complicates her life. She had believed earlier that motherhood would rob her of her identity. The very moment she undergoes abortion she becomes *disgusted with the fecundity of her body that got pregnant in less screwing than anybody's she had ever heard of (139)*.

Though Truman prefers Lynne to Meridian, he fails to understand Lynne when she is raped by Tommy Odds. Tommy informs Truman that she wanted him to do so. Instead of protecting Lynne from Tommy

Odds, Truman condemns her. It is Meridian who offers Lynne her love. She helps her and realizes that both of them can talk "intimately like sisters." In fact, like an ordinary black woman, Meridian could have discarded and denied any love to Lynne. However, her mind has been broadened so much that she never thinks about Lynne and Truman in personal terms but in the larger context of her black community. As a result, she rejects the traditional roles imposed on black women and tries to overcome the guilt she feels for their rejection. In spite of Meridian's painful private experiences, she is born anew and succeeds in evolving a new self. Thus she emerges as a leader of the black race.

The novel opens with Meridian's encounter with Truman, her old comrade in the Civil Rights Movement. He observes her leading the black children of the town of Chicokema to see Marilene O' Shay, a mummy of a dead white woman. The author moves backward in time to Meridian's recent past to introduce the theme of her growing up. In a flashback, Walker briefly mentions Meridian's experience with the revolutionary group in New York, nearly ten summers ago. She remembered her mother and the day she lost her.

Meridian's mother's love was withdrawn when she was thirteen. Her sense of alienation and isolation had deepened and she had not come to grip with the whole truth about herself. She began a search for freedom. Coming back to the present, she, although a revolutionary prefers non-violence because she is, as Robert Bone feels, *held by something in the past: by the memory of the old black men in the South... and the sight of the young girls singing in the Country choir, their voices the voices of angels (15)*.

Meridian's sexual initiation has come early, between the age of twelve and fifteen in Dexter's funeral parlour. Dexter and his assistant had exploited her ignorance and curiosity. In her early sexual encounters, she experienced herself as an object, used by a man for his sexual gratification. Her lack of interest in sex after marriage, stemmed from these early experiences: Robert Bone further says that, *their pawing over her refusal to do anything more than tease them had seemingly separated her from her young husband forever (17)*.

Meridian's husband takes up a mistress due to her lack of interest and refusal to indulge in sex during her later pregnancy, which slowly leads to

disintegration. It gives her a full knowledge of the fact that all the women who are living just for their children are really dead.

The very fact of becoming a mother brings her many constraints. This makes her to think *so this is what slavery is like* (88). She begins to dream each night to murder Eddie. She is consumed by self-doubt and vacillation. This leads her towards frustration and even thoughts of self-destruction. Her endless suspicion about Eddie only serves to highlight her growing cynicism. Meridian is engaged in the search for selfhood by discovering meaning in her roots and traditions. She continues the struggle against the oppression of black women. As she struggles to reclaim her past and re-examine her relationship with the black community she gains internal strength to endure hardships.

Walker focuses on the complex relationship of Meridian, Truman and Lynne. She analyzes how sexism and racism influence the Black and White relationship. Truman marries Lynne, because he wants a woman who is perfect in all the eyes of the world-an ideal White Woman is the closest thing to power he can get in White America.

But the other black revolutionaries, like Tommy Odds, view Lynne as a White "bitch" and Truman suffers under the pressure of ostracism from the group. He muses whether Lynne is guilty of "Whiteness" or he is guilty of marrying a white bitch. Truman finally returns to Meridian three years after his marriage with Lynne and confesses that loving Meridian makes him feel "healthy, purposeful". Meridian's love for Truman is "purged". It is not sexual, "it is forgiveness". Lynne gives him back to Meridian and returns to the South.

In order to transform their society, black people must understand their own heritage and transform themselves. It is in the process of attempting social change through the movement that Meridian discovers her own personal path. This discovery is itself the theme of the novel.

*Meridian* is Walker's most explicitly and narrowly a "political" novel. It exposes the gap between the official claims of American democracy and the state's exploitative and repressive practices. The novel is critical of sexism within the civil rights movement. For example, Meridian subordinates the struggle within gender to the "larger" questions raised by the

imminent exhaustion or depletion of the movement itself. Meridian's theory of "One Life" dissolves the barriers of class and education between herself and the black community at large and effectively depoliticizes the struggle with the movement's patriarchal values and practices by locating the "personal" problems of sexism within the nationalist project.

Susan Willis sees the novel as being made up of anecdotes. This is true particularly of Part I consisting of anecdotes from the past and the myth-making faculty of Walker is seen in the legendary figures she introduces in the anecdotes to illuminate various aspects of the black woman's experience. Such are the Wild Child, Louvinie, the slave whose tongue had been cut off and buried, out of which grew the magnificent magnolia tree "Sojourner" in Saxon College. While the Philomela - like cutting off the tongue symbolized the silencing of black women whose creativity is thwarted, the flourishing of the tree represented alternative fulfilment.

The cutting down of the tree by the enraged black students represents the paradoxical nature of black anger, which in its helplessness turns against itself and its sprouting at the end signals the regeneration of the black community. The life of Fast Mary, another such legendary figure, a former Saxon student, who killed her baby and herself, points out what might have happened to Meridian and her child, if she had not broken out of accepted stereotypes.

In the development and growth of Meridian, education and Saxon College plays an important role. It was here that she encountered the Wild Child, the Sojourner and the story of Fast Mary. These anecdotes of mythic dimension drew her to an understanding of what it means to be a black woman in a racist and sexist society.

It was here during a chapel service that she articulated for the first time her rejection of western religion. Her participation in the Atlanta Movement and the short-lived membership in the black revolutionary group enabled her to attain political maturity, eschewing violence choosing a deliberate commitment to the black community as her life's mission. It made her view her relationship with her mother objectively, in the perspective of black motherhood.

While at Saxon, Meridian was haunted by persistently recurring dreams. Peter Bruck, makes a

pointed observation thus: *She dreamed she was as character in a novel and that her existence presented an insoluble problem, one that would be solved only by her death at the end (17)*. Walker brings out the obsessive power of the dream by repeating thrice in three consecutive paragraphs. This is followed by a perceptive comment on the stereotypical image of Meridian.

According to S.Boyce, *even when she gave up reading novels that encouraged such a solution-and nearly all of them did-the dream did not cease (18)*. Death and suicide seem to be the only solution to the problem, faced by black women. Walker brings her heroine to the brink of death before she recovers. Miss Winter's whispered words "I forgive you "break the vice-grip of a primeval guilt over Meridian's consciousness.

The image of death and resurrection is evoked in this episode, subliminally. Later too, when Truman witnesses Meridian willing herself towards good health, says Keith E. Byerman, *his first thought was of Lazarus, but then he tried to recall someone less passive, who had raised himself without help (19)*.

The reference to Christ's resurrection is obvious. Perhaps the name of Miss Winter is symbolic, since she ushers in new life in Meridian; Thus Meridian's life at Saxon marks a significant stage in her intellectual development, social commitment, emotional maturity and spiritual wholeness.

According to B.Burford,

*Alice Walker has been a womanist on the American fictional scene for more than two decades. She prefers to call herself a womanist, as womanism appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility and women's strength (20)*.

Walker explores relationships between black women's past tradition and societal change as crucial to the individual's search for freedom and wholeness. She probes many facets of interrelationships of sexism and racism in the American society. She seeks to transform "suspended" women into "emergent" black women.

*Meridian* is an examination of Meridian's growth, her movement into womanhood and her emergence as a strong woman. Walker makes her protagonist undertake a lonely pilgrimage that encompasses elements of initiation, renunciation, atonement and

release. Throughout the book the liberating goal of the pilgrimage is emphasized by symbols and images related to slavery and freedom. The quest is for self-knowledge, for wholeness that leads to transcendence, as Meridian finally discovers herself and her relationship to the world at large.

## CONCLUSION

The final section of the novel, Meridian's quest for black Womanhood turns into a greater concern for the wholeness of black society. As a womanist, Walker believes that besides being conscious of sexual issues, she must be committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Meridian's final discovery suggests that black women should struggle to break away from the bondage and strive for the social and spiritual upliftment of their community. When Truman returns to Meridian, she sets him "free", and in so doing she herself also becomes "free at last". Without such freedom she cannot truly participate in nurturing black life. The novel ends with a new image of Meridian as a liberated black woman with a hard-won insight into the riddles of life.

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