

## **Womanist Perspective in Alice Walker's *Meridian***

**Dr. P. Kumaresan**

Associate Professor & Research Advisor,  
PG and Research Department of English,  
Sudharsan College of Arts and Science,  
(Affiliated to Bharathidasan University)  
Perumanadu, Pudukkottai – 622104.

**&**

**S. Robert**

Research Scholar (Full-Time),  
PG and Research Department of English,  
Sudharsan College of Arts and Science,  
(Affiliated to Bharathidasan University)  
Perumanadu, Pudukkottai – 622104.

### **Abstract**

Alice Walker prefers womanism to feminism precisely because it is rooted in all – inclusive female culture and does greater justice to all women irrespective of colour, class or creed. Moreover, womanism does full justice to the life, love and transcendence of black women. In fact the definition of the term, womanist locates the Black Woman first as a Black Feminist. Then it celebrates the sensuality and spirituality of the Black woman. Then it identifies her as the variegated flower in the garden of humanity. This research Paper attempts to delineate the Womanist Perspective in *Meridian*. The novel deals with a black woman's life as it discloses itself for self-realization and liberty.

**Key Words:** Womanism, Feminism, Black Woman, Self-acceptance

Walker's second novel *Meridian* (1976) proves that true revolution enlightens the inner self. *Meridian* (1976) is a depiction of a young woman's journey from isolation, guilt, segregation, and to self-acceptance, empowerment, devotion and love. An individual has to confront egocentric self concerns to establish democratic pattern in society. The painful picture of social and cultural degeneration and hypocrisy is stirring and thought provoking. Walker attempts to resolve conflict between individual and society for a forceful demand for justice and integrity. The novel explores the process of personal and social growth is motif that characterizes *Meridian* (1976). The novel deals with a black woman's life as it discloses itself for self-realization and

liberty. It studies Meridian's feminine in the rapidly changing cultural atmosphere of the 1960s and her search for wholeness. She is able to redefine her role, which has been handed down to black women through tradition and society. As Walker writes in the novel *Meridian*:

For it is a song of the people transformed by the experiences of each generation that holds them together and if any part of it is lost the people suffer and are without soul. (Walker, 1976, 205-206)

Walker's dedication to maintain the principle of democratic set up is portrayed through her protagonist Meridian. Meridian is committed to the ethics of humanity, equality in the community and self-esteem of the Black people. Walker's various artistic and social concerns are systematically combined in *Meridian* (1976). As Walker in her personal life, Meridian endeavours to project a path to greater self-awareness and undergoes the adversities in creating her identity among the chaos of social upheaval and sexual isolation. The novel is an articulation of Meridian's growth, her movement into womanhood and her emergence as a strong woman. Women characters depicted in these novels are highly influenced by the myths in the past. Meridian is extremely motivated by the narrative of the Sojourner Truth that observes the violence imposed on the Black women during the era of slavery. Her story inspires her to involve herself actively in the Civil Rights Movement that intended to render equal rights and opportunities to the black women in all walks of life.

Meridian separates herself from immediate blood relations such as her child and parents in order to support herself with the larger racial and social generations of blacks. She has blended with her contemporary activist and older generation of oppressed black. As a result, of her commitment to the society, her personal identity has become a communal identity.

Walker's compassion about black women and the relationship between struggle and transformation becomes the core of her story *Meridian* (1976). Meridian Hill is engaged in the search for selfhood by finding meaning in her origins and traditions. She continues the struggle against the oppression of Black women. She

struggles to reclaim her past, analyzes her relationship to the black community and gains internal strength to tolerate hardships. Meridian's search for wholeness can be defined as her attempt to express the totality of self and how that self is related to the world. It is a search for freedom, joy and contentment in being a woman, a search for self-love and a yearning for communal love. Walker suggests that Meridian's struggle is not with a man, a family or with a specific community. According to Meridian, motherhood is not only rearing of children but also nurturing life, the development of life. She states that her existence in the African-American community is as indivisible from all black people of her period. Meridian wrote:

there is water in the world for us brought by our friends though the rock of mother and god Vanishes into sand and we, cast out alone to heal and re-create ourselves. (Walker, 1976, 213)

Meridian's quest for self-assertion, self-awareness and wholeness obtains a mythic dimension. Meridian embraces her black heritage, her woman's heritage and reaches out to her people. She is a liberated black woman who knows what she should take from the past to create a new future. Truman, Meridian's husband knows that in her pilgrimage Meridian would return to the world cleansed of sickness. Thus, Meridian's incorporation into the community is a new birth into spiritual wholeness. Truman transforms when he understands his mistake of marrying a white woman Lynne Robinowitz looking at her colour. The womanist attitude of Meridian makes her forgive him and permits him to live with her.

Walker describes her title character as an inherently strong and determined person as she believes in the innate power of the woman. In fact, Walker argues that individual struggles are an inevitable part of life and yet this is how one triumphs over one's barriers. Meridian's struggle for personal transformation echoes June Jordan's definition of her duties as a feminist:

I must undertake to love myself and to respect myself as though my very life depends upon self-love and self-respect... and...I am entering my soul into a struggle that will most certainly transform the experience if all the people of the earth, as no other movement can, ...because the movement into self-love,

self-respect and self- determination is...now galvanizing...the unarguable majority of human beings everywhere. (June, 142)

Meridian managed to escape the symbolic death of being killed by patriarchy's standards and petrified into a perfect woman: she leaves behind Obedient Daughter, Devoted Wife, and Adoring Mother. In spite of the many worst situations, as a womanist Walker has not made a tragic death of Meridian at the end of the novel. Barbara Christian writes Walker's works with traditional and feminist perspectives on motherhood, attempting a compromise that would allow her protagonist to live:

As many radical feminists blamed motherhood for the waste in women's lives and saw it as a dead end for a woman, Walker insisted on a deeper analysis: she did not present motherhood itself as restrictive. It is so because of the little value society places on children, especially black children, on mothers, especially black mothers, on life itself. In the novel, Walker acknowledged... Yet the novel is based on Meridian's insistence on the sacredness of life. (Christian, 1985, 90)

Walker teaches her community to discard the barriers in their way for progress and prosperity. She blames the patriarchal authority, which views woman as an object of sexuality. Traditional parameters of evaluating woman as a devoted wife and sacrificing mother are outdated and unacceptable. Walker as womanist critically bashes all those ties that degrade and destroy the inner self of a woman. Meridian is ready to give her child for adoption and attends college with a scholarship in spite of her mother's disapproval. Meridian is unsuccessful to meet the values of her mother's religion that anticipate women to be submissive, meek and humble. Self sacrifice and martyrdom of unwed mothers agonizingly results in self abnegation which Meridian determined to fight back. Walker's perception of conventional and feministic motherhood is not restricted to blind commitment to authority. Patriarchal standards destroy a woman who dares to ignore its commands. However, Meridian flees the symbolic death with her activist participation and courageous spirit to oppose deteriorating traditions. Meridian is not grown into a perfect mother but she makes advancement through her activist position. The division of the role of mythical black motherhood and the unconventional rebellious activist mother opens an unbridgeable wedge that mothers like Meridian have experienced.

**Wholeness in *Meridian***

As a writer Walker's preoccupations are, "the spiritual survival, the survival *whole* of my people. But beyond that, I am committed to exploring the oppressions, the insanities, the loyalties, and the triumphs of black women" (O'Brien 1973:192). Certainly, these preoccupations are evident in Walker's second novel, *Meridian* ([1976]1986) This novel has been chosen for exploration because the process of personal and social growth is a motif that characterizes *Meridian*. The novel concerns a black woman's life as it unfolds itself for self-realization and freedom. It examines what the notion of feminine freedom means to Meridian, a black Civil Rights Worker in the rapidly changing cultural climate of the 1960s and how her search for wholeness is complete when she is able to redefine her role which has been handed down to black women through tradition and society.

Walker's first novel, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970), traces three generations of Grange Copeland's family in Georgia from the early 1920s through the 1960s. This realistic novel centres around the life of a young black girl, Ruth, and her grandfather, Grange. Grange brutalizes his own family because of the overwhelming racial circumstances of early twentieth century rural Georgia. Under the pressure of poverty and alienation, Grange causes his wife Margaret's demoralization and suicide, a pattern which is repeated by his son, Brownfield, who murders his own wife, Mem. But their daughter, Ruth, is brought up by her grandfather, Grange, who in his "third life" attempts to salvage some of his own wasted life by protecting Ruth. He had survived but "survival whole" was what he wanted for Ruth. Ruth emerges into a young woman at the same time as the Civil Rights Movement, and there is just a glimpse at the end of the novel of how that movement will affect Ruth's life. She becomes aware by watching the Civil Rights activists that it is possible to struggle against the abuses of oppression. Walker's previous concerns about "the spiritual, the survival *whole*" of black people, her commitment to exploring the oppressions and triumphs of black women, black women in relation to their mothers and the relationship between struggle and change, become more marked in *Meridian*. Meridian Hill 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 which Ruth dreams of. As she struggles to reclaim her past and (like

Hurston's Janie) re-examines her relationship to the black community, she gains internal strength to endure hardships.

*Meridian* is a maturation novel, an examination of Meridian's growth, her movement into womanhood and her emergence as a strong woman. Walker constructs for her protagonist a lonely pilgrimage that encompasses elements of the universal monomyth: 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.

*Meridian* is organized into three major parts: the first part focuses on Meridian's initiation into adulthood and her preparation for a journey; the second part describes Meridian's active participation in the Civil Rights Movement after her renunciation of her child; and the third part "Ending" concentrates on atonement and release.

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, and tells her: "when things are finished it is best to leave." Meridian's reply "And pretend they were never started?" (p.27) is the prelude to a journey back in time.

The author moves backward in time to Meridian's recent past and her mother's 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. They pressed her to answer the question "Will you kill for the Revolution?" with a positive yes. As they were waiting for her to speak, she recalled a past experience. She remembered her mother and the day she lost her. Her mother's love was withdrawn when she was thirteen. Her sense of alienation and isolation had deepened. Knowing that she was not whole, because at thirteen she had not come to grips with the whole truth about herself, she began a search for freedom. Coming back to the present, she

replies like a true revolutionary that she would reject violence as the approach to change. She prefers non-violence because she is

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 (pp.27-28).

The authorial comments: "And so she had left North and come back South . . . remaining close to the people - to see them, to be with them, to understand them and herself" (p.31) foreshadows the direction of Meridian's pilgrimage in search for genuine values. Walker arranges the narrative material in the novel in "a crazy-quilt story" (Tate 1983:176) form. The narrative strands jump back and forth in time. They work on many different levels and form a complex structure. The personal histories of Anne-Marion Coles, the Wild Child, Meridian's father's grandmother, Feather Mae and the legend of the sacred tree Sojourner are interspersed with the past of Meridian's parents, Mr. and Mrs. Hill, all of which provide the reader with insight into the various layers of black experience. The chapter "Indian and Ecstasy" focuses on Meridian's loving relationship with her father and her spiritual communion with him.

This spiritual experience down the Serpent's side which gives Meridian "the feeling of flying" (p.58) is their tangible connection to the past. It is through her relationship with her father that the seeds of her spiritual growth are sown.

Within the narrative presentation of the complex material, the initiation experiences of Meridian are described which *are* trying and painful. No one in her family had taught her what to expect from men, from sex. The lascivious Daxter, the in charge of the funeral home, pursues Meridian when she was only twelve. She sees his assistant's seduction of another school girl. Still she is unaware of her physical vulnerability and acquires a young boyfriend, Eddie; She marries her lover and awaits the birth of her son. Her whole life is changed by an experience she did not enjoy.

Meridian sees sex as a "sanctuary." Once in her sanctuary Meridian wonders if she could "look out at the male world with something approaching equanimity, even charity; even friendship" (p.62).

Her marriage with Eddie falls apart because she feels that as a wife her life will always be empty and she cannot diminish her "self." Besides, Eddie, like his name, "would never be grown up" (p.70).

Now the focus of Meridian's story is her motherhood. 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 wifedom and motherhood. The inner frame is the family life of the Hills. She discovers from the example of her own mother that motherhood is "being buried alive, walled away from her own life, brick by brick." Her mother makes her feel guilty for "shattering her mother's emerging self" (p.51).

Her girlhood and young adulthood represent periods of emotional impoverishment. As regards Meridian's process of initiation into this new responsibility of motherhood, her pregnancy came as a total shock.

She knew she did not want the child. After the birth of her son, he did not feel like anything to her but "a ball and chain" (p.69). Tending to the needs of the child was "slavery" (*ibidem*). She craved for freedom and felt as though something perched inside her brain was about to fly. She does not want to raise her child in a society "where children are not particularly valued" (p.104).

Walker suggests that it is not easy for Meridian to break the outer frame and to free herself from the mythic image of motherhood which culture and society has imposed upon her. The chapter "Battle Fatigue" analyses Meridian's confrontation with her mother and her inner conflict. When seventeen year old Meridian, a deserted wife and a mother, becomes aware of the past and present of the larger world in 1960, she decides to give away her child to better her life at Saxon College and to save the life of her child. Meridian's perpetual confrontation with a debased self-image because she could not live up to "the standard-of motherhood that had gone before" (p.91) results in her illness and the "spiritual degeneration" in herself (p.92).

She awaits healing so that she can study at Saxon and actively participate in the Civil Rights Movement. Meridian gets rid of her illness, her recurring dream of death and her own feelings of inadequacy and "primeval guilt" (p.96) when she is reconciled with her mother in a dream and whispers: "Mama, I love you. Let me go" (p.125).

Miss Winter, who treats Meridian as if she were her own child, forgives her and makes it possible for her to encounter the hostile world with renewed strength. Although marriage and motherhood are negative experiences for Meridian, she attempts to transform herself. Meridian's journey through myth and legend, precipitated by the dream of her mother, takes her back in time and space as she prepares to move forward in consciousness. When she renounces her child and leaves the small Mississippi town to attend college in Atlanta, Meridian Hill begins the first journey toward wholeness. Saxon College symbolizes white values that have been seeped into the thinking of middle class blacks.

Thus this novel Meridian presents the different perspective of a woman through the character Meridian. Alice Walker has opted to explore the womanism in four different categories and the title character Meridian experiences one among those four categories.

**References:**

- O'Brien, John. (Ed). *Interviews With Black Writers*. New York: Liveright.1973. Print.
- Tate, Claudia. (Ed) *Black Women Writers at Work*. New York: Continuum. 1983.Print.
- Walker, Alice. In *Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*. New York: Harcourt Jovanovich.1980. Print.
- Walker, Alice. *The Color Purple*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. 1982. Print.
- Walker, Alice. *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*. New York: Harcourt. 1970. Print.
- Walker, Alice. *Meridian*. New York: Pocket Books.1976. Print.