

# Self awakening and search for Identity in Meridian

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**Abstract - African – American women novelists give voice to the black women who are oppressed, crippled and degraded. A strong believer in the inherent power of women, Alice Walker depicts her title character Meridian as an innately tough and resolute person, though not one without problems. The present study explains how Meridian tries to establish her identity. She awakens from her subordinate status as a black female, daughter, wife and mother to her own self. She realizes that her power lies in her unique and unwavering courage. Meridian features earlier examples of strong female role models.**

**Keywords - Alice Walker, Meridian, Identity, Awakening, Courage**

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## INTRODUCTION

The gender bias, the strictly marked male and female roles, the undue emphasis on the female chastity, and the social stigma attached to it are major obstacles in the 'rehabilitation' of the women who have been the victims of male brutality.

Alice Walker's second novel Meridian is also about the female protagonist of the same name who gradually awakens 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.

*"For Meridian, the autobiographical embodiment of Walker herself, coming of age in the sixties does not offer a free ticket, but provides an atmosphere of confrontation and the questioning of contradiction with which the individual must grapple."*

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 community and the family have failed to do.

Provoked by this violence. she longs to become a volunteer She to is still only seventeen she protest along with the other volunteers against the town's segregated hospital facilities and participates in the freedom March to church, in singing freedom songs and keeping a midnight vigil. In a melee The police knock her down, and she is trampled by people running back and forth The sheriff grabs her by the

hair and someone begins punching her and kicking her in the back. However, she does not even scream except very intensely in her own mind. As a volunteer, Meridian does some typing work, and teaching illiterates to read and write. As a result, there comes into her life a sea change. The change that helped her to a go back to school once again.

Her participation in the Civil Rights Movement gets her a scholarship sponsored by a generous and wealthy white family in Connecticut After getting a scholarship, she joins the Saxon College which was only two hours away and just across the street from Truman's school, R. Baron College. The Saxon college exercises great influence her life. As her scholarship is inadequate, to provide for maintenance and pocket money. She works at as an assistant to black Professor called Raymonds who like Trumans is staunch supporter of black people's rights, and advocate of protecting the virtue of black women from white man.

However in his private life, he oppresses the black women much as the whites do. Meridian somehow makes compromises and co-exists with him. However, the sexist Politics at work is corrosive evil. In her quest for self-fulfillment and identity they function as reminders that sex involves compromise. Meridian, at least for time being, is unwilling make these compromises.

After her first year in Saxon College, Meridian feels at peace with herself. When she sits under the Sojourner, the largest tree on the campus, she believes that no one on can see her as she becomes invisible. Being invisible, she can forget that she has rejected the roles of wife and mother. She is also plagued by guilt about her mother, and she suspects that she is responsible for wasting her mother's life.

Although she never totally understands why, she longs for her mother's forgiveness. In addition, she strives to overcome the guilt of being black woman.

The Sojourner tree has a well-known legend behind it. It was planted on the Saxon Plantation— later, of course, Saxon College by a slave named Louvinie, who a tall, thin, strong woman. Because of the history of the tree, other slaves believed it possessed magic. The rumour was that the tree could talk, make music, was sacred to birds and possessed the power to obscure vision. Once in its branches, a fugitive slave could not be seen. The Sojourner tree is a natural metaphor. It suggests an alternative to white man's definition of black history and language. It gives a historical underpinning for Meridian's work in the movement. The tree's history denounces traditional black motherhood. Meridian understands that Sojourner is the living agent of Louvinie's voice and story— the dead slave's gift to life and eloquence to the black women who come after her. Thus Meridian recognizes Louvinie who refuses to accept powerlessness or voicelessness, even though she is a slave who cannot speak's."

Louvinie's Sojourner tree also commemorates Sojourner Truth, an escaped slave woman who questioned those white women who tried to deny her right to speak and whose eloquent call and response "And ain't I a woman?" electrified the 1853 Akron women's rights convention. Like Louvinie, her mythical voice exemplifies the struggle for wholeness and equality. In her youth, Meridian is inspired by this tree and tries to do what ordinary black women never dare and think to do.

The story of the Wild child provides a new dimension to the personality of Meridian. The wild child was a young girl who had managed to live without parents, relatives or friends for all of her thirteen years. The wild child, as people say, had appeared one day in the slum that surrounded Saxon College when she was already five or six years old. Her only language comprised of obscenities and farts and she is Meridian's "social antithesis." More slippery than a "greased pig" the wild child is virtually uncatchable. When it becomes obvious that the wild child is pregnant, Meridian takes it upon herself to bring her into the fold. Baiting her with glass beads and cigarettes, she catches the "wile child," and takes her to the campus, bathes and feeds her, and then sets about finding for her. However, Meridian's role as caretaker or mother comes to an abrupt end when the wild child is thrown into the street where she is struck by a car. Thus although "Meridian and the wild child do not share a common social ground, they come together on one point, and that is the possibility of being made pregnant. For both of them, conception stands for oppression."

In addition to this child bearing is associated with murder and suicide. The wild child reveals "how alone woman is, because of her body." After the wild child is run over by a car and killed the young woman at

Saxon College realize that at their fate is bound up with hers. But in their rage at the President's refusal to let them use the college chapel for the funeral, they turn toward Sojourner, their protectress - the largest magnolia tree in the country with its magical maternal Presence.

The very fact that the chapel service was refused to the dead wild child indicates the age-old bias. The emphasis at Saxon was on form and the preferred "form" was that of the finishing school, girls whose goals, wherever she would later find herself in the world, was to be accepted as an equal because she knew and practiced all the proper social rules. Saxon rules prevented smoking, drinking, speaking loudly, going off campus without an escort, remaining off campus after six, talking to boys before visiting hours etc. However, the administration of the college neither condoned Saxon students' participation in the Atlanta Movement, nor discouraged it.

In the very first year, Meridian studies hard and makes the Dean's list. But during her second year, she finds it impossible to study white others were being beaten and jailed.

Thereafter she comes in contact with Truman Held, a black Civil Rights activist. She falls in love with him and feels protected. However, Truman starts dating a white girl, Lynne Rabinowitz, and exchange students. She does not reject Meridian outright but marries Lynne Rabinowitz.

Hence, Meridian is casually replaced by Lynne. For Truman Meridian is the "African Queen" upon whom Truman would like to bestow the honour of bearing his "beautiful black babies." Lynne, however, is a beacon of victory, the symbol that proclaims his equality with the white man since he too possesses a white woman.

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 made her feel ashamed, and as if she was less. This leads Meridian to search her soul and re-evaluate her blackness and her femininity. She tries to remember everything that she can about white women. According to her the white women

*"Only seemed to hang about laughing. after school, until when they were sixteen or seventeen they got married. Their pictures appeared in the society columns, you saw them pregnant a couple of times. Then you were no longer able to recognize them as girls as you once "knew". They sank into a Permanent oblivion. One never heard of them doing anything that was interesting (Meridian :08)."*

Black women, on the other hand, were always "escaping to become something unheard of." Meridian notices that the black girls who did leave home and come back as successful secretaries, schoolteachers, or doctors, all had one thing in commerce.

*"They all had altered their appearance so that they might look more like white women. They straightened and bleached their hair, wore make-up, and made other things, all under the guise of self-improvement." (108)*

Meridian becomes of herself an adventurer. Moreover, she is thrilled to think that she belongs to the people who produced Harriet Tubman, the only American woman who had led troops in battle. Thus, Meridian, a woman who feels guilty of being a black woman, starts reclaiming the black woman's history of and tries to associate herself with that positive and inspiring history black women. However, she also realizes that this awakening would keep her and Truman apart because "Truman . . . did not want a general besides him. He did not want a woman who tried, however encumbered by guilts and fears and remorse, to claim her own life." (110)

Consequently, Meridian realizes that she can be happy with a man only if he can allow her to be free.

Meridian and Truman continue to love. Her pregnancy complicates her life. She had discovered earlier that she could not bear motherhood as her child 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. It seemed doubly affair that after all her sexual 'experience' and after one baby and one abortion she had not once been completely fulfilled by sex." (114-115)

As a result, she rejects the traditional roles imposed women and tries to overcome the guilt that she feels on their rejection.

When Camara, the daughter of Truman and Lynne dies, Meridian pulls them out of their suffering and consoles them. It is then that Lynne and Truman really begin to understand Meridian. As far as Meridian concerned, "it was then that her feeling for Truman returned, but it was not sexual It was love totally free of possessiveness or contempt. It was love that purged all thoughts of blame from her too accurate memory. It was forgiveness." (172-73) In due course of time, Meridian carves out her out a path that evolves her own way of life.

Meridian wins the trust not only of her people but also of Touman. No doubt, in the initial stage of her life, Meridian is full of guilt. She is guilty of taking away her mother's life, giving away her child to her mother in law, and of her tubes. However in the end she determines:

*"I want to put an end to guilt*

*I want to put an end to shame*

*Whatever you have done sister*

*(My brother) know*

*I wish to forgive you love you*

*it is not the crystal stone.*

*of our innocence.*

*that circles us*

*not the tooth of our purity that bites*

*bloody our hearts." (191)*

After the abortion, she asks the doctor to tie her tubes so that she would never have to enforced pregnancy. By doing so, she rejects the status of a biological mother.

When Truman starts dating Meridian several months after the abortion, she tells him boldly: "It's over. Let it stay." (115)

Although she loves Touman, she realizes that he cannot accept her for who she is, and therefore she rejects his proposal. Hence she becomes committed to the cause of the civil rights movement and starts registering the voters much more vigorously than in the past.

Though Truman prefers Lynne to Meridian, he fails in understanding Lynne when she is raped by Tommy Odds. At such crisis, it is Meridian alone who tries to understand Lynne. It is she who offers Lynne her love. She tries to understand her and helps her realize that both of them cantalk 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 so that she never thinks about Lynne. Truman or any other black and white man and woman in personal terms; she thinks about them in large context of her black community. In spite of Meridian painful private experiences, she is born anew and succeeds in evolving a new self and in due a new course of time emerges as a leader of the black race. She creates herself that she must overcome the idea of a woman's place and, to fulfil this mission, fears herself away from the two institutions, the family and the church which have traditionallysheltered the women. At times, these institutions have offered comfort and guidance, they have contributed to a restrictive belief in the proper roles. and proper sphere of women. Though the journey of self discovery is lonely one, Meridian

undertakes it with courage and dignity and tries to become a mother of black community.

Thus Meridian chronicles the sexual and racial politics of the Civil Right struggle. It is the story of Meridian Hill, a young Southern black woman from her childhood to her thirties and her relationship with Truman Held, a black artist and activist, and Lynne, his white wife, also a civil right organizer. It records her pilgrimage to spiritual well-being. Propelled by her sense of guilt at giving up her son to others and aborting her second pregnancy, and thus having violated life at its deepest level. Meridian embarks a search for meaning in both her personal and political life. The novel probes the ideology and of motherhood and extends the meaning of mother, of cherishing life, to that of the revolutionary.

Meridian's journey towards awareness leads her after instance of society's rejection and abuse of children until she arrives at a fierce commitment to remaking the world. She also comes to understand that she owes it to herself and to the life given to her continue live and fight against injustice The novel a redefine Afro-American motherhood and presents it as angle of seeing life," of valuing all life and resisting all that might destroy it. It is a spank that fuels a genuine sense of love and responsibilities for the welfare of the whole community.

Meridian experiences motherhood in the initial stages of her life and then decides to get rid of her own bad baby Eddie to seek admission in find out her own path and identity This new way and identity enables her to attain, "the highest point of power, prosperity, splendor, health, vigor, etc."

As a result, she develops "a completeness of being." Hers is a journey from the most ordinary position as a high school dropout to a self-illuminated person who has attained selfhood and knows what is the purpose and mission of one's own life. To begin as an ordinary black female and to end as a self-assured person is not as easy development. To gain the development glimpse of herself which is in full bloom she has had to undergo innumerable trials and tests. As a result, she is evolved "from a woman raped by racial and sexual oppression to a revolutionary figure effecting action and strategy to bring freedom to herself and other poor disenfranchised blacks in the South." In fact, Meridian's quest for wholeness and her involvement in the civil rights movement is initiated by her feelings of inadequacy in living upto the standards of black motherhood.

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 hers 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. There no purpose behind Mrs. Hill's marriage and it is only after she begets the children that she feels she could never forgive her community, her family. his family, the whole world, for not warning

her against children. In the very first Pregnancy, she was" she becomes distracted from who she was."

As a result, 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?" (M.50) It is this understanding which enables her to instinctively interpret a look in the eyes of her a full knowledge of the that all those living just for their children were really dead.

She becomes aware that she is "being buried alive, walled away from her own life, brick by brick. (51) Her children burden to her. Being compelled to do what she never wanted to do out of her own urge, she loses her creativity, she wants to go back to teaching but fails doing so because she cannot pass new exams and does not like the new generation to students. Having learned to follow other 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 who should have had children she feels bad about stealing away her mother's serenity, and shattering her mother's emerging self. However, she is unable to undo what her mother had done to her Motherhood for Mrs. Hill is a burden which represents the loss of teaching position and more importantly, herself. However she about never instructs her adolescent daughter, sex and motherhood she never allows her daughter to benefit from the knowledge that she has gained from the past. She keeps Meridian in a state of ignorance and denies her a chance for a better life (M-107)" It only perpetuates the general ignorance so pervasive in the black community. Mrs. Hill as a mother was deprived from self-fulfilment and self-realization, she tries to regiment Meridian into the sole of a mother Consequently, when Meridian leaves her son, Eddie Jr., with her mother-in-law, Mrs Hill condemns des act.

In her high school days. Meridian falls in love with Eddie who initiates her into sexual life, resulting in her pregnancy. They marry after thereafter. In fact like her mother. Meridian is not interested in ex She endures sex because it gives her those things, she would have been just happy, happier without it of course, in due course of time. she also understands the meaning of sex and the power of her body.

Even before marriage, she is seduced by a mulatto called George Dexter. Dexter's assistant thinks that she is a fair game just because she is a black. However it is only after giving bits de Eddie Jr. that she understands what it is to be a woman and more importantly to be a poor black woman, and a mother.

The very fact of becoming a mother brought many constraints of her life. Concern for herself became secondary to concern for the child. This makes her think: "so this is what slavery is like." (M-69) Revolted by her situation she begins to dream each

night of ways to murder him. In characteristic fashion, 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 serve to highlight her growing cynicism.

Central to Walker's thinking is the idea that all living things must love themselves, and try to be free that spirit will eventually triumph over convention, no matter what the cost. Walker believes that we must learn to survive life's sufferings with spunk and sass. We must protect ourselves and others from disabling suffering, prevent it when possible, walk with sufferers when we are powerless to protect or prevent. We must live lovingly in the present moment and revel in earthly delights without abuse or excess. We must work to transform our environment shaping our households, relocating our breathing space, reconfiguring our relationship, always opting for greater health. We must recognize, eschew, resist the dysfunctional, wait things through until wholeness and integrity prevail. We must look upon all that lives, all that is, with a worshipful gaze. That is live and let live.

Walker herself says; "The greatest value a person can attain is full humanity, which is a state of oneness with all things."

Thus in *Meridian* Walker pinpoints self-esteem and the desire for a sense of self. The novels illustrates the self awakening of the heroine *Meridian* and her search for identity in which she is some far successful also. It is a triumph of woman's struggle.

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