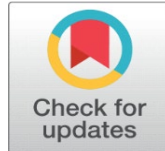


# EXPLORATION OF SELF: A FEMINIST STUDY OF ALICE WALKER'S MERIDIAN

Anju Mehra <sup>1</sup>✉

<sup>1</sup> Associate Professor, Department of English and Foreign Languages, MDU, Rohtak, Haryana, India



## Corresponding Author

Anju Mehra,  
[anjumehra781980@gmail.com](mailto:anjumehra781980@gmail.com)

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## ABSTRACT

The present paper explores the profound themes of self-discovery and identity formation found in Alice Walker's *Meridian* through a feminist lens. Walker skillfully blends the political and personal in this narrative, which follows the protagonist on her path to self-awareness and empowerment against the backdrop of the Civil Rights Movement. The paper also emphasizes the heroine's defiance of cultural and patriarchal norms by carefully examining the ways in which race, gender, and class intersect. This inspection of *Meridian*'s struggle with social expectations deepens our knowledge of feminist literature by highlighting the pivotal role that reflection plays in the fight for justice and equality. Using a feminist qualitative approach, the paper examines Alice Walker's *Meridian* through textual analysis and theme investigation.

**Keywords:** Alice Walker, *Meridian*, Feminism, Self-Discovery, Identity, Civil Rights Movement, Intersectionality, Empowerment, Patriarchy.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Alice Walker's *Meridian* delves deeply into the subject of identity within the framework of the civil rights movement, highlighting the intertwining of race, gender, and identity. This feminist analysis explores the protagonist's path to empowerment and self-realization, emphasizing the challenges and victories faced by women in a culture characterized by structural oppression. This paper investigates how Walker's depiction of Meridian Hill challenges conventional gender stereotypes and promotes women's agency and autonomy. The paper also intends to further the conversation on feminist literature and Walker's continuing significance in the context of modern identity studies.

In *Meridian*, Walker embraces more universal themes of personal liberty, self-reliance, and self-realization by stepping beyond the confines of the feminine gender. Walker crafts narratives where an oppressed black woman can overcome violence and self-healing, without requiring significant social change, a dialectical

process, or collective political action. Her characters, greatly impacted by the political events of the 1960s and the transformations brought about by the liberation movement, teeter on the brink of awakening. In real life, she herself becomes the embodiment of the emerging black woman. In *Meridian*, Walker focuses mostly on black women's struggles and victories, their relationships with their mothers, the connection between hardship and transformation, and "the spiritual survival of whole people."

Three main sections divide the novel: the first covers Meridian's journey and entrance into adulthood, the second focuses on her active involvement in the Civil Rights Movement following her child's renunciation, and the third section discusses her atonement and liberation. Walker therefore creates a journey that incorporates aspects of the global monomyth for her protagonist. Walker also focuses on the womanist attributes of outrageousness, boldness, wilfulness, and the need to conserve and use the traditional wisdom that Black women have handed down through the generations.

## 2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Within feminist literary studies, Alice Walker's *Meridian* has attracted a lot of attention. Walker's depiction of Meridian Hill, the heroine, as a multifaceted incarnation of African American femininity negotiating the intersections of race, gender, and socio-political action during the Civil Rights Movement, is emphasized by academics such as Barbara Christian (1980). Other critics like Deborah McDowell (1991), have looked at how Walker challenges gender norms through Meridian's developing sense of self, emphasizing the protagonist's fight for identification and autonomy in the face of repressive society's expectations.

Furthermore, academics such as Beverly Guy-Sheftall (2002) contend that Walker's story is representative of a larger feminist discourse that emphasizes the significance of personal empowerment and self-recovery for African American women. Together, these analyses highlight Meridian's importance as a work of feminist literature, as well as Walker's sophisticated method of examining the self from a feminist perspective.

Alice Walker defined the struggle of Black women through the story of Meridian. The Black girl grows up in a hostile and violent environment from birth. The only way she can survive in the harsh environment around her is to become resilient within herself. These young girls learn how to defend themselves at a young age by being very tolerant and determined to live, since their parents and other black males are unable to keep them safe. At the beginning of the book, Meridian appears to be on the verge of disintegration. Her hair has fallen out, and she has episodes of fainting.

Her face alarmed him. It was wasted and rough, her skin a sallow unhealthy brown, with pimples across her forehead and on her chin. Her eyes were glossy and yellow and did not seem to focus at once. Her breath, like her clothes, was sour. (11)

The reason she is killed by her husband is because she "had gone outside the home to seek her pleasuring, while still expecting him to fool the bills." In her capacity as a "human rights crusader," Meridian aggressively challenges this perception of women as pessimistic, thoughtless bodies, sex objects, and objects to hang fake hair and nails on. In addition to having a masculine appearance, Meridian behaves like a man. Her steadfast leadership qualities, often associated with men, determine her "place" as a woman. In this way, her success in challenging tradition

serves as a sharp critique of America's reliance on roles. She embodies Toni Cade's claim:

You find yourself in destroying illusions, smashing myths... being responsible to some truth, to the struggle. That entails ... cracking through the veneer of this sick society's definition of masculine and feminine. (26)

Meridian started looking for completeness from a young age, even as a little kid. She was able to establish a link with the American people's shared history by following in the footsteps of her father and great-grandmother. This particular association emphasizes the feminist philosophy of striving for the collective survival of the community as a whole. By returning the property to its rightful owners, her father takes the injustice against the Native Americans one step farther. Her great-granddaughter inherits the "outrageousness" from her great-grandmother, Feather Mae. After her blissful encounter at the mound, Feather Mae awakens to the everlasting existence in every aspect of this universe. She even goes so far as to start worshiping nature and rejecting the traps of established religions:

Later Feather Mae renounced all religion that was not based on the experience of physical ecstasy-thereby shocking her Baptist church and its unsympathetic congregation – and near the end of her life she loved walking nude about her yard and worshipped only the sun. (50)

Due to her involvement in the Civil Rights Movement, Meridian receives a scholarship from a well-to-do white family in Connecticut. She transfers to Saxon College, which is located just across the street from Truman's school, R. Baron College, and only two hours away. The Saxon College greatly influences her life. She works as an assistant to a black professor named Raymond, who, like Truman, is a fervent defender of black people's rights and a champion of defending the virtue of black women from white males, since her scholarship is insufficient to cover upkeep and pocket money. But in his private life, he treats black women with the same oppression that white people do.

Meridian manages to live with him by making concessions. They serve as a constant reminder of the sex-related risks in her pursuit of identity and self-fulfilment. Meridian is not prepared to make these concessions, at least not for now. After a year at Saxon College, Meridian rests under the Sojourner, the biggest tree on campus, and feels at peace with herself. She believes that no one can see her because she's invisible. Being invisible may cause her to forget that she has renounced her responsibilities as a mother and wife. She also feels guilty about her mother's death, believing that she is to blame for it. She struggles to understand why she feels the need to ask her mother for forgiveness. She also aims to get over her shame about being a black woman. Walker underscores this concept throughout the book by referencing Sojourner's story of the tree:

Louvinie's tongue was clipped out the root. Choking on blood, she saw her tongue grounded under the hell of Master Saxon. Mutely, she pleaded for it, because she knew the curse of her nature land without one's tongue one's mouth or in a special spot of one's own choosing, the singer in one's soul was lost forever, to grant and snort through eternity like a pig. Louvinie 's tongue was kicked toward her in a hail of sand. It was like to think pink rose petal bloody at the root. In her own cabin she smoked it until it was a soft and pliable as leather. On a certain day, when the sun turned briefly black, she buried at under a scrawny magnolia tree of the Saxon plantation. (33-34)

A well-known folklore surrounds the Sojourner tree. Naturally, a tall, slender, and powerful slave named Louvinie planted it on Saxon Plantation and later at Saxon College. Other slaves believed the tree contained power because of its history.

Rumors circulated that the tree possessed the ability to generate music and communicate, and birds held it in high regard. People also claimed that the tree could block out light. Once within its branches, it was impossible to see a runaway slave. The Sojourner tree is an organic allegory. It offers a different interpretation of black history and language from that of white people. It provides historical context for *Meridian's* contributions to the movement. The tree's history criticizes traditional black motherhood. *Meridian* knows that Sojourner is the live embodiment of Louvinie's voice and narrative—the vitality and eloquence given to the black women who follow her by the deceased slave.

Consequently, *Meridian* acknowledges Louvinie, who defies “to accept powerlessness or voicelessness, even though she is a slave who cannot speak.” (Collaham 230). Her path towards completeness and satisfaction begins when she discovers the hidden gems that have allowed the African American community to survive in the face of oppression from white America. The compelling and poignant tale of Louvinie highlights the oral tradition's ability to maintain and reinforce the narrative. A slave named Louvinie had a terrifying talent for telling spine-tingling tales. The children of her Lord were very much looking forward to her tales. A weak heart caused one of the master's children to fall and die one day in the midst of a narrative.

In addition, Louvinie's Sojourner tree honors Sojourner Truth, an escaped slave whose poignant plea and rejoinder, “And ain't I a woman?” ignited the 1853 Akron women's rights conference. Sojourner Truth questioned white women who attempted to deny her the opportunity to speak. Her legendary voice, like Louvinie's, symbolizes the fight for equality and completeness. When *Meridian* was younger, the tree gave her the confidence to take on challenges that other black women would never consider or undertake.

*Meridian* successfully raises an orphan daughter after sacrificing her own child. Even without the constraints of social norms that define motherhood, *Meridian* can fully fulfill the responsibilities of motherhood. *Meridian's* personality took on a new dimension after learning about the wild child's narrative. For her whole thirteen years, the little girl known as the “wild child” had survived without the support of her parents, relatives, or friends. As the saying goes, the wild child had already been five or six years old when she suddenly emerged one day in the ghetto that surrounds Saxon College. *Meridian's* initial reaction to this child marked the beginning of a significant trend in her life.

The day *Meridian* saw the wild child she withdraw to her room in the honors house for a long time. When the other students looked into her room they were surprised to see her lying like a corpse on the floor beside her bed, eyes closed and hands limp at her sides. While lying there she did not respond to anything; not the call to lunch, not the phone, nothing. (24)

Moreover, the act of having children is associated with both suicide and homicide. The untamed youngster demonstrates “how alone a woman is because of her body.” The young ladies at Saxon College come to understand that their destiny is intertwined with that of the wild child after she is slain. When the President refuses to allow them to hold the burial at the campus chapel, they turn to Sojourner, one of their protectors—the nation's largest magnolia tree, known for its ethereal, maternal influence.

*Meridian* presents new possibilities for black women. The black lady, who had been living her whole life on her knees and back, takes a firm stance against the brutality and decides to live up to her own beliefs. The novel's female protagonist embodies universal themes such as self-awareness and self-realization. *Meridian*

triumphs and develops into a more fully realized human person on all levels—mentally, emotionally, and spiritually.

Adolescent Meridian finds herself in an unhappy marriage against her will. After finding out she is pregnant, Meridian unwillingly marries Eddie, the child's father, and tries to be a "proper" wife and mother. She harbors thoughts of killing her child due to the oppressive and limiting nature of her position, but ultimately, she chooses not to harm her own body and instead contemplates suicide. When her marriage finally fails, she believes she is saving both of their lives by giving her child away. Meridian then goes on to attend college, participate in the Civil Rights Movement, and join a revolutionary organization, where she learns that she cannot be slain in the name of revolution.

Another step toward her liberation as a woman is Meridian's refusal to accept the role of an "adopting mother," which Christianity prescribes. Meridian's resolve is such that not even her mother's emotional pleadings can convince her to take on the responsibility of raising her kid. Moreover, unlike a typical mother, she refuses to be Truman's mother and aborts his child instead. She is able to achieve "the highest point of power, prosperity, splendor, health, vigor, etc." thanks to her new identity and way of life. She develops "a completeness of being" as a result (Washington 148).

Her journey has taken her from an average high school dropout to a self-enlightened individual with a personal goal and purpose. Starting as a regular black woman and ending as a confident adult is not an easy journey. She must pass many trials and tests before she can see the full bloom of herself. Thus, she has evolved from a victim of racial and sexual oppression to a revolutionary leader, implementing actions and strategies to secure freedom for herself and other marginalized blacks in the South (Kubitschek 159).

Meridian's sense of inadequacy in meeting the expectations of black motherhood actually serves as the impetus for her search for wholeness and participation in the civil rights struggle. In *Meridian*, black motherhood as an individual experience within the framework of historical black motherhood destroys women's souls and harms their offspring in a vicious circle of ever-greater-damage. Meridian searches for a new identity that will free her from the confines of tradition-bound society and culture throughout the book. She travels through mysterious places in search of this other set of ideals before arriving at self-realization. According to Usha Puri, "*Meridian* is a maturing relationship to the world at large" (41-42).

As a result, a study of *Meridian* illustrates the limits of the feminine gender that Walker attempts to accept. Her perspective on gender is more broadly based and addresses issues of personal liberty, independence, and self-awareness. As the previous discussion has shown, *Meridian* documents Meridian Hill's first experiences, which she goes through in an attempt to discover who she is, what kind of person she is, and how to become whole.

After introducing her female character as a victim of abuse, Alice Walker goes on to depict her attempts to demonstrate her social standing.

Lastly, she uses an artistic examination of the link between a person and the community to explore the black women's quest for selfhood in the book. Through their struggle, they advance in life's journey and cultivate a cosmic perspective on it. With this perspective, they create a harmonious existence founded on mutual respect, tolerance, and trust. As a result, Walker's female characters come to symbolize the many facets of society that, when combined, contribute to the creation of a world characterized by democracy, love, and justice.



When Meridian learns to value her community and its positive impact on her life, she becomes complete. She discovers that accepting her past—both individual and societal—is the first step toward moving on to the future. The black church and its music persisted throughout history, but recognition of them was lacking. Meridian's journey comes to a triumphant conclusion as she uses the church to uncover who she is. She almost comes back to life and, after regaining her strength, chooses to continue healing similar individuals. She leaves Truman, who has at this point joined her in her current endeavour, to continue her social work.

Meridian tells him about her quest for wholeness. After achieving completeness, she shares the knowledge with Truman and stirs his spirit to pursue his own fulfilment. "In passing this struggle for understanding to a man, Walker infers that the need for understanding of creativity and life in both men and women is a pre-requisite for revolutionary change," writes Barbara Christian (243), indicating that she agrees with the idea of including men in bringing about revolutionary change. Meridian has a very confused start to her adventure but eventually finds freedom from the demons that haunt her body and spirit.

To sum up, it can be said that Meridian lays the path for many other black women who are forced to shrink Shrivel and die in the course of achieving their own liberty. By establishing new pathways for a common perspective of being a Black mother, she redefines parenthood. She walks the untrodden paths of selfhood, paving the road for her followers. Her fight comes to an end when she is finally free. Her tears are not for herself, but rather for the old gentleman's son who was killed in the Black church.

### **CONFLICT OF INTERESTS**

None.

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