A Study of Wholeness in Alice Walker's *Meridian*

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ABSTRACT

Alice Walker's *Meridian* (1976) is considered an autobiographical work. The title character was born in the rural South, like Walker, and uses education as a means of escape. Pregnant and married to a high school dropout, Meridian struggles with thoughts of suicide or killing her child, but eventually decides to give the child up and attend college. After graduating she enters an organization of black militants in Mississippi, but realizes that she is not willing to kill for the cause. With this knowledge she resolves to return to rural Mississippi to help its residents struggle against oppression. One of the basic principles of Walker's Womanism is the concept of wholeness. The attempt at wholeness comes from remaining true to you and fighting against the constraints of society. In this study, the researcher attempts to explore the concept of wholeness in Walker's *Meridian*.


INTRODUCTION

Alice Walker has been a "womanist" on the American fictional scene for more than two decades. She prefers to call herself a "womanist" because womanism is better than feminism; "womanism" appreciates and prefers "women's culture, women's emotional flexibility . . . and women's strength" (Walker 1983:xi). Walker explores relationships between black women's past tradition and societal change as crucial to the 'individual search for freedom and wholeness. She probes many facets of interrelationships of sexism and racism in the American society and, in her fiction, she seeks to transform "suspended" women into "emergent" black women. Mary Helen Washington (1977:22) analyzes Walker's personal construct of the history of black women and how "suspended" black women characters in literature emerge as "The Emergent Women."

Wholeness in Alice Walker's *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 centers 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 wifehood 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.1'4).

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. The college was a training ground for capitalists and for "ladies." Meridian, Anne Marion and other like-minded friends decide that they have two enemies: "Saxon, which wanted them to become something - ladies that was obsolete, and the larger, more deadly enemy, white racist society" (p.95). Meridian despises capitalism and by her involvement in the Civil Rights Movement and the Atlanta Movement she wants to seek social justice, she wants black women to be "accepted" as equal.

In the movement she meets "the vain, pretentious" (p.99) activist and artist, Truman Held. While demonstrating against segregated facilities both Meridian and Truman are arrested and beaten. During this struggle for their rights Meridian realizes that she loves Truman and that "they were at a time and place in History that forced the trivial to fall away and they were absolutely together" (p.84). But even such an experience of union with Truman is changed when she conceives his child and has an abortion because Truman becomes involved with a white exchange student, Lynne Rabinowitz. To Meridian it seemed "doubly unfair that after all her sexual experience and after one baby and one abortion she had not once been completely fulfilled by sex" (p.115). She realizes that in order to retain her wholeness she must rise above bodily claims.

Abortion and sterilization symbolize her anger and frustration against Truman, pregnancy and motherhood. It is a metaphor for root out sexual weakness because Meridian wants to meet Truman at an equal level. It is a key event that pushes Meridian forward to act on her own. In fact, Meridian's "pilgrimage" cannot be complete until she transcends sexual, maternal and racial categories through her participation in the revolution and her commitment to "recreate" the world where black children may thrive without thorns of guilt. Walker then pauses to focus on the complex relationship of Meridian, Truman and Lynne. She analyzes how sexism and racism work to influence black woman-black man-white woman relationships. Truman marries Lynne because he wants a woman who is perfect in all the eyes of the world, an ideal woman, and the 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" (p.138). 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 he married Lynne and confesses that loving Meridian makes him feel "healthy, purposeful" (p.140). Meridian's love for Truman is "purged..." It was not sexual, "It was forgiveness" (p.173). Lynne gives him back to Meridian and returns to the South.

The author takes a visionary leap in the final section of the novel. Meridian stands as a witness to the common lot, a survivor of the movement. She, who had not wanted to kill people in the movement, is converted to a new approach to revolution. She has reached a point in her life where she is no longer evasive. Listening to the old music, she is moved by the beauty of the black church. Her contribution to the revolution will be her "memory songs." For it is "the 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" (p.201). 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 core of the novel. Truman atones for hurting Lynne's feelings. When Truman asks Meridian if her love for him is changed, her response "No, I set you free ..." (p.216) shows that she has released herself from the sexual bonds and she intends to pursue her own wholeness.

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. In keeping with the black literary tradition it is a search for escape from the body and freedom for the soul by discovering "the truth" in the darkness. Walker suggests that Meridian is "Free at last." Her ties are not with a man, a family or with a specific community. Motherhood for her includes not only rearing of children but nurturing life, the continuity of life. She sees her existence as inseparable from all black people and writes:

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 (p.213).

It is in this sense that Meridian's search for self affirmation and wholeness acquires a mythic dimension. Unlike Nella Larsen's Helga Crane in *Quicksand* whose anguish is existential because she is bound first by race and then by sex, 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 knows that in her "pilgrimage" Meridian would return to the world "cleansed of sickness." He would never see "his" Meridian. "The new part had grown out of the old" (p.219). Thus, Meridian's incorporation into the community is, in essence, a new birth into spiritual wholeness.

REFERENCES


