

## I. Introduction

### Alice Walker as a Writer

Alice Walker was born in Eatonton, Georgia in 1944 as the eighth child of a southern sharecropper and a part-time maid. Walker graduated from high school as valedictorian of her class and entered Spelman College in 1961 on a Georgia rehabilitation scholarship. Then she transferred to Sarah Lawrence College in New York. During her return to Sarah Lawrence College, Walker was pregnant and contemplating suicide due to it. She felt trapped by her body and believed that only an abortion could free her. She finally aborted. Walker received her Bachelor of Arts degree in 1965. She published her first short story, "To Hell with Dying" in 1967. On 17 March, 1967, she got married with Melvyn Roseman Leventhal, a Jewish civil rights lawyer and moved to Jackson, Mississippi. She was critiqued for her decision to marry outside of her race. While in Mississippi, she wrote and supported various civil rights activities. Walker gave birth to a child Rebecca Grant in 1969. The marriage ended in 1977 when the couple divorced amicably. Today Walker continues to express creatively her wish for wholeness for those who have been erased from history, torn from their racial heritage, silenced, mutilated and denied freedom.

Alice Walker, a poet, novelist, essayist, short fiction writer and Pulitzer prize Laureate, has climbed the proverbial ladder of success to become one of the most gifted and influential writers of America. Her second novel *Meridian* (1976) received such acclaim that Walker accepted a Guggenheim Fellowship that enabled her to concentrate full-time on her writing. She was awarded Pulitzer Prize for the novel, *The Color Purple* (1982). She is one of the first African American writers to explore the paralyzing effects of being a woman in a world that virtually ignores issues like black-on-black oppression and female victimization. Walker is innovative in her

attempts to save African American writers from the darkness. As a co-owner of her own publishing house, Wild Tree Press, Walker promotes and mentors new writers. In 1977, while teaching at Wellesley College, she introduced academia to one of the first African American Women's literature courses. She has also taught African American Women's studies at Brandies, the University of Massachusetts, Yale, and the University of California at Berkeley.

Walker is influenced by writers like Arna Bontemps, Flannery O'Connor and even greatly by Zora Neale Hurston. Alice Walker in her book, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, gives an idea about being influenced by Hurston: "She had provided, as if [she] knew someday I would come along wandering in the wilderness, a nearly complete record of her life. And though her life sprouted an occasional wart, I am eternally grateful for that life, warts and all" (12). Like Toni Morrison, Walker too believes in writing the work which she herself wants to read.

Likewise, Walker opines that writer's job is to save the lives of the people. Whether the writer belongs to majority or minority, the writer has power of saving the lives of people. Walker also believes in change. She sees writing as a means to bring change in society. To bring such changes she depicts and challenges the evils of racism in her writing. Walker in her essay "Choosing to Stay at Home" compares racism with "[k]udzu vine that swallows whole forest" (165).

Walker wrote about Civil Rights Movement and even participated in civil rights activities. Feminism provides her an insight to view the movement's strengths and weakness in personal, concrete terms, terms which are linked back to community and forward a more complete social change.

Her novel *Meridian* (1976) focuses on the Civil Rights Movement, sexual exploitation of women and the guilt felt by the protagonist Meridian. In many ways,

the novel concerns with women. It presents issues like motherhood, sexual exploitation of women, Meridian's struggle to find herself in the Civil Rights Movement. In her writing, she explores the issue of the spiritual survival of black people, in particular black women.

### **Works of Alice Walker**

Alice Walker's writing portrays the black women's tragic experiences in a racist and sexist society and their struggle for survival and wholeness. She writes mainly about experiences and feeling of black women, who are doubly oppressed. Her first novel *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970) exposes the abuses and maddening injustice of African American internal familial conflict and oppression. This is a realistic novel that presents three generations of a family whose history is marred by race, class, and gender oppression. The main focus of this novel is not the social conflict generated by race prejudices that were generally written about during the Black Nationalist Movement. Instead, the novel challenges African Americans to take a scrutinizing look at themselves. The novel exposes the abuses and maddening injustices of African American internal familial conflicts and oppressions. Because of this break with the norm, some critics charged Walker for not presenting the right image of African American life. But Robert James Butler says:

The single work which best expresses Walker's powerful ambivalence towards southern life is her first novel, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, a book notable for its vitality and its resonance.

Ambivalence or what Grange Copeland might call "two-heading", allow Walker to tell the full truth about her experience in the south.

(195)

Similarly in 1973, she shared her vision of the victories and tribulations of African American women's lives in a collection of short stories entitled *Love and Trouble: Stories of Black Women*. In these stories, Walker depicts female protagonists who are doubly marginalized due to white society that treats them as Other. Since they are black, they face the internal domination from the black community itself. The collection of thirteen stories won the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters Rosenthal Award in 1974. Her book of poetry, *Revolutionary Petunias and Other Poems* (1973) won the Lillian Smith Award of the Southern Regional Council in 1974 and was nominated for the National Book Award. In the same year, Walker published two children's books: *Langston Hughes, American Poet* and *The Life of Thomas Hodge*.

Likewise, in 1979, Walker edited *I Love Myself When I am Laughing*. The stories that this anthology contains were collected by Walker after working incessantly to restore the memory of Zora Neale Hurston to the annals of history. Walker takes pride in the relationships and continuities developed from within matrilineal tradition of writing. For Walker, women such as Gwendolyn Brooks and Hurston are foremothers from whom she and other African American Women writers can learn and grow. Although both of these writers are important to Walker and her creative vision, Hurston is an icon for her, representing superb literary achievement and courage.

Walker's pattern of challenging the minds and morals of her readers continued into the 1980s. In 1982, she stepped across the line of a highly forbidden taboo with the portrayal of Celie in *The Color Purple*. This novel examines not only black-on-black oppression but also incest, bisexual love, and lesbian love. Written in epistolary form, this novel also exposes the internal turmoil parenting the spiritual decay of

African Americans who, like the novel's protagonist, silently endure abusive male dominated relationships. In *The Color Purple*, Celie is raped by a man she believes is her father. Later, she is battered and mentally abused in a loveless marriage. Although this novel ignited controversy (especially from African American men who claimed Walker's novel was creative male-bashing) it was on the New York Times bestsellers list for twenty-five weeks. Walker achieved the status of a major American writer when the novel won both the Pulitzer Prize for fiction and National Book Award in 1983. Two years later, it was adapted as a major motion picture directed by Steven Spielberg. Critic Trudier Harris complains about the negative and unrealistic portraits of Blackmen and women:

This novel simply adds a freshness to many of the idea circulating in the popular culture and captured in racist literature that suggested that black people have no morality when comes to sexuality, that black family structure is weak if existent at all. (175)

Walker does not believe in idealizing the African American people. She depicts the real picture of the society.

Walker also published a collection of prose entitled *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* in 1983. The book is a memoir of Walker's experiences and observations of African American women's culture and continues her exploration of the hidden truths defining female wholeness. In this collection of essays, reviews, and articles, Walker defines her feminist stance as a womanist. For her, a womanist is a woman who "loves other women [and] is committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female"(xi). In various essays of the book, she discusses the writing of Zora Neale Hurston, Jean Toomer, Langston Hughes, and Flannery O'Conner, as well as her own work. She also looks at the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and the

antinuclear movement of the present decade. Throughout the volume, Walker explores the theories and practices of feminists and feminism, incorporating what she calls the "Womanist" tradition of black women. In one of the essays collected in the book which is entitled "From an Interview" she writes, "I am committed to exploring the oppressions, the insanities, the loyalties, and the triumphs of black women" (250).

Walker's concern completely ascends the physical in her fourth novel, *The Temple of My Familiar* (1989). The reception of this novel was mixed and it did not receive the broad popularity like that of *The Color Purple*. *The Temple of My Familiar* solidly argues Walker's belief that roots of African American Women's hope for spiritual wholeness lies within the soil of their African origin. But for Walker, even these origins are not above reproach and evaluation. Regarding this novel critic Ikenna Dieke says, "Alice Walker's concern with life is usually deep and metaphysical, full of fresh revelation of truth and beauty, and shows real depth of emotion and intensity of feeling" (507).

In her fifth novel, *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992), Walker uncovers the mysteries of a ritualistic past that has imposed its presence into a changing world- a world that defines female circumcision as sexual blinding, domination, and abuse. *Possessing the Secret of Joy* brings the life and imagination of Tashi, a character who appeared in both *The Color Purple* and *The Temple of My Familiar* in full view. In *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, she attacks the culture of female circumcision which aims to limit women's sexuality and increase male pleasure. Tashi, a young woman becomes the victim of this female genital mutilation which destroys her life physically and psychologically and she gives birth to a mentally challenged son due to the traumatic experience. Tashi is driven to murder M. Lisa, a woman who circumcised her and who also killed her sister Dure by performing the circumcision. This act of

Tashi is not only against M. Lisa but also against patriarchal social system that subdues womanhood. Thus Walker in this novel asserts resistance as necessary element to destroy the shackles of domination.

*By the Light of My Father's Smile* (1998), another novel of Walker too explores the issue of repression of female sexuality. The chilling reality of oppression and control mandated by the traditions of female circumcision is further explored by Walker in her book and documentary film *Warrior Marks* (1994), directed by Indian-British filmmaker Pratibha Parmal. Walker has not fictionalized the issue of circumcision as in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, but she takes a documentary standpoint in *Warrior Marks*. Walker asserts that circumcision is not a culture but a torture and a form of child and female abuse. Through different projects she wants to make the public around the globe aware that such practices are still going on to dominate women.

Walker continued her steady pace of publication in the 1990s with several volumes. Among them are *Alice Walker Banned* (1996) and *Anything We Love can Be Saved: A Writer's Activism* (1997). In 1998, she published her sixth novel, *By the Light of My Father's Smile*, which examines native people's spiritual traditions in Mexico and the impact they have upon a visiting missionary African American family. The novel explores extra natural as well as beyond death experiences. *Now is the Time to Open Your Head* (2004) is Walker's latest novel. It is a story of spiritual adventure of a woman. The quest for self is also the major issue of the novel. Alice Walker thus with incomparable vision and insight captures the folklore, language, pain, spirit and memories of African Americans only to weave them into a quilt of compassion that she spreads before the world-full, rich and flowing.

*Meridian*, Alice Walker's second novel, received such acclaim that Walker accepted a Guggenheim fellowship to concentrate full time on her writing. The works of Walker are generally revolutionary and deal with the contemporary experiences of black Americans, particularly of black American women. Ever since the publication, the novel *Meridian* has received many critical acclaims. Shedding light on the female protagonist of the novel, Elaine R. Ognibene praises her as a "woman of incredible moral concern who acts in small but significant ways to change the world in which she lives – a model for us all" (347).

Like Walker's other novels, *Meridian* too deals with the issues of blacks, particularly women who are doubly oppressed. Walker's second novel *Meridian* is set against the turbulent backdrop of the Civil Rights Movement, which gained force in the 1960, triggering demonstrations, and protest against the racist and segregationist policies that controlled and shaped the lives of African Americans in the south. Regarding Walker's concern of Civil Rights Movement in the novel *Meridian*, Susan Danielson comments:

While in much of Walker's fiction, the Civil Right Movement hovers as background or future hope, in *Meridian* she places it in the center, portraying the way in which such a social movement can modify the triple jeopardy of blackness (race), poverty (class) and femaleness (gender) by providing as arena within which people can explore alternative ways of interacting. (328)

Participation in the Civil Rights Movement was central to Walker's life not only as young woman but also as a young writer. She has written about the movement in some of her early poems, short stories, essays and briefly in her first novel, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, but in *Meridian* Civil Rights Movement is one of the major

issues. The protagonist of the novel, Meridian like Walker herself participates in the movement and tries to motivate people to use their voting rights.

Walker herself in her book, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, says about Civil Rights Movement that " if it gave us nothing else, it gave us each other forever [. . .] called us to life" (128). The protagonist of the novel *Meridian* devotes herself for the rights of blacks. Ann M. Downly remarks about Meridian:

After each of Meridian's performance, members of the black community come to her with their gratitude and gifts of food. She tells them to use the power of vote, and she continues to visit people to encourage them to register. Her acts are spiritual as well as political, for she is not only communicating her vision of Civil Rights, but she also brings the community together, regenerating circle. (37)

Walker's characters protest against the marginalization of African American people as well women.

Walker is greatly influenced by Zora Neale Hurston. Walker herself in the essay "Saving the Life that is Your Own" comments about her relation with Zora Neale Hurston by saying "I would not have written the story [. . .] had I not known that Zora had already done a thorough job of preparing the ground over which I was then moving" (13). The issue of motherhood is also one of the major concerns in Walker's works. Lindsay Tucker comments upon Hurston's influence on Walker and issue of motherhood by citing Dianne F. Sadoff's words, who says:

Walker and Hurston tend to idealize the mothers, Hurston because her mother died when she was nine, Walker because of her need for literary vindication. Walker suffers from a kind of matrilineal anxiety

and that before she can define and validate her own texts, she must "invent" Hurston as a viable author and source. (2)

Hurston is a role model as well as source of inspiration to Walker. She praises Hurston for her efforts.

Apart from other issues, *Meridian* depicts the multi-faceted politics of race and gender. *Meridian* also depicts the relationship between minorities- Blacks and Jews, Blacks and Blacks, male Blacks and female Blacks and so on. Donnarkrolik Hollenberg comments upon the novel in following words:

The story of a young black woman's struggle to find herself in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, it depicts a conflicted love triangle between the heroine, Meridian, her black boyfriend, Truman, and a white, Jewish woman friend, Lynne whom he marries. Although its primary subject is legacy of black women in sexist, racist America, the novel also tests the limits of cross-racial relations between two minority groups, Black and Jews. (81)

Walker draws her characters from the contemporary situation in America. She writes with sharp critical sense as she deals with the issues of tactics and strategy in the Civil Rights Movement, with the possibility of interracial love and communication, the vital and lethal stands in American and Black experience, with violence and nonviolence, holiness and self-hatred. Walker develops her character with great care and attention.

Walker in the novel *Meridian* defines the word Meridian before starting the story. Commenting on Walker's definition of the word *Meridian* just prior to the start of novel Lindsey Tucker says:

It is evident from Walker's positioning of rather lengthy definitional material just prior to the start of the novel that she means us to regard the name as important. And indeed, the name does suggest the same dynamic configuration. It seems to promise her movement, even to mandate her destiny. However, it is also apparent from the length and multiplicity of Walker's definitions that she is not desirous of fixing the terms. "Meridian" can mean an apex or point, but also a vector or track, something that is both fixed and moving. (11)

Walker's female characters resist against the racist and patriarchal institutions.

In the novel, *Meridian*, the protagonist, Meridian has been conditioned by her community's patriarchal institutions to repress her individuality that does not allow her to speak out appropriately. But she resists against such patriarchal dominations.

Critic Lynn Pifer comments:

When Meridian finds that she cannot conform to authorized notions of appropriate speech (public repentance, patriotic school speeches, and the like), her only rebellious recourse is silence [. . .] she begins a process of personal transformation when she sets out alone to fight her own battles, through personal struggle and Civil Rights work. (77)

Walker's women characters display strength, resourcefulness, resistance, and creativity and forgiveness in confronting and overcoming oppressions in their lives. Her work is an exploration of the individual identity of black woman and how embracing her identity and bonding with other women affects the health of her community at large. Barbara Smith in her essay "Towards a Black Feminist Criticism" says that Alice Walker "discloses how the political, economic, and social

restrictions of slavery and racism have historically stunted the creative lives of Black women" (168).

In this way, different critics have analyzed the text in aforementioned ways. They have talked about Civil Rights Movement, interracial conflict, and other issues but no critic has done research on guilt faced by the protagonist, Meridian. So, this research will be useful and innovative one to explore the issue of guilt and release.

## **II. African American Feminism**

Feminism came into existence for the sake of women's right and equality, so as to end the domination of women. There is a long history of women being dominated in patriarchal society. If we look at the history we can find females being treated as inferior to men. Aristotle viewed female as lacking some qualities and St. Thomas Aquinas went to the extent of calling woman as imperfect man. After Descartes theorized a concept of split between the mind and the body, women have been associated with the body, whereas men have been associated with the mind. For instance, Freud believed that females suffer from penis-envy. Different feminists have protested against such concepts about women and their marginalization. Feminists try to explain the causes and conditions in which men are more powerful and their production, ideas and activities are seen as having greater value and higher status than women's. Charlotte Bunch defines feminism as "an entire world view or gestalt, not just laundry list of women's issues" (12).

Feminist theory thus began with the immediate need to end women's oppression. The word feminism was not used until the end of the nineteenth century though the emergences of recognizably feminist ideologies were before the nineteenth century as well. Anyway, it is a political theory and practice to free all the social bondage of patriarchy. Joan Wallach Scott has following view regarding feminism:

Feminism as politics appeals to the women [...] to mobilize them into a coherent political movement; the history of feminism thus has been the history of the project of reducing diversities (of class, race, sexuality, ethnicity, politics, religion and socio-economic status) among females to a common identity of women (usually in opposition to patriarchy, a system of male domination. (4)

Feminism resists against the racial and sexual exploitation of women.

Different feminists from the west have contributed to the feminist movement. Mary Wollstonecraft, Virginia Woolf, Simone de Beauvoir, Betty Friedan, Kate Millet, Elaine Showalter and Gilbert and Gubar are the major contributors to it. Wollstonecraft says that mind does not know sex and females also can gain equal knowledge and success if they are provided equal opportunity. Virginia Woolf in her book *A Room of One's Own* (1929) explores the situations of women writer and conditions in which they wrote. Beauvoir, in her book *The Second Sex* (1949), attacks the patriarchal myths that forwarded the notion of female essence prior to individual existence. Betty Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963 where she criticizes the idea that women could only find fulfillment through child rearing and home making. Friedan hypothesizes that women are victims of false belief system that requires them to find identity and meaning in their lives through their husbands and children. Millet in her hard hitting work *Sexual Politics* (1964) argues that in all societies the relationship between the sexes has been based on power and that they are therefore political. Elaine Showalter in *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Bronte to Lessing* (1977) develops a concept of gynocriticism, which is concerned with woman as writer. She says that women need to have their own writing to make the literary convention of women different and independent from the males. Gilbert and Gubar in *Mad Woman in the Attic* (1979) aim to locate a place where the woman's writing is heard. They also revise Bloom's male centered theory. Thus, the western feminists speak for the equal rights and opportunity of women. They talk about liberation of western white women.

The dissatisfaction of Afro-American women towards the feminist theory of western white women contributed to the rise of African-American Feminism. The

African-American feminists argue that the problem faced by women of colour is different from that of women of western white community. Western feminists' assumption that all of the same gender across classes and culture are socially constituted as a homogeneous group is criticized by the African-American feminists. They argue that the only focus upon gendered power and viewing women as a homogenous group shadows the differences between women. The African-American feminists consider western feminism almost a failure for not speaking the issues of women of colour on one hand and making themselves higher and superior to coloured women on the other. Thus, western mainstream feminism does not speak about the double marginalization of the African-American women.

In the 1970s and the 80s, several African American women raised their voice against double marginalization of the women of colour which gave rise to African American feminism. The African American feminist movement grew out of, and in response to, the Black Liberation Movement and the women's movement. This movement was formed in effort to meet the needs of coloured women who felt they were being racially oppressed in the Women's movement and sexually oppressed in the Black Liberation Movement. All too often 'black' was equated with black man and 'woman' was equated with white woman. As a result, coloured women were an invisible group whose existence and needs were ignored. The purpose of the movement was to develop theory which could adequately address the way race, gender, and class were interconnected in their lives and to take action to stop racist, sexist and classist discrimination.

African American feminists argue that sexism, class oppression, and racism are inextricably linked together. They believe that the liberation of African American women entails freedom for all people, since it requires the end of racism, sexism, and

class oppression. The African American feminists like Sojourner Truth, bell hooks, Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou, Zora Neale Hurston,, Barbara Smith, Alice Walker and so on have explored the problems and issues of coloured women in the racist, sexist and patriarchal society where they have been doubly victimized. They have focused on the issues that define the black female experience previously disregarded by the women's movement.

So, African American feminists charge the western feminism as Eurocentric and essentialist. They also argue that the western white feminists do not talk about multiple marginalizations of coloured women. The women of colour are firstly oppressed by the whites and secondly by African American men. Barbara Smith, an African American feminist defines feminism as:

Feminism is the political theory and practice to free all women: women of colour, working class women, poor women, physically challenged women, lesbians, old women, as well as white economically privileged heterosexual women. Anything less than this is not feminism, but merely female self-aggrandizement. (8)

African American female writers argue that historically women of colour have been stereotyped as sex objects and breeders. The white women view coloured woman as sexual temptress of white men and function the role of prostitute. African American women have also been stereotyped as 'bad' women. These stereotypes and myths have helped to take control over African American women in the society from the time of slavery. The African American feminists fight against such created stereotypes.

bell hooks views African American feminism as a "commitment to eradicating the ideology of domination that permeates Western culture on various levels--sex,

race, and class" (8). They seek equality in all aspects on the humanitarian ground. They believe that as human, they should get respect and equality in all fields.

The women of colour are victimized by culturally generated agencies. They are victimized because they are black and females. They share their identity with African American males on the level of race and with white females on the level of sex. The men of colour oppress the women of colour because they think themselves superior to women. Even the white women oppress the women of colour because they also consider women of colour as inferior to them. Their subjectivity is determined, and produced by social forces that lie outside of themselves as individuals. Of course, precisely because agency is socially and differentially produced, women of colour are more victimized than white females or men of colour. African American women are simply the patient of racist patriarchal society. They do not have agency which can provide them with power to act. In *Key Concepts in Post Colonial Studies*, Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin define agency as "ability to act or perform an action . . . [that] hinges on the question of whether individual can freely and autonomously initiate action" (8). The western scholars and western feminists, who had agency, committed the blunder of homogenizing the problem faced by the women of colour and white women. Those scholars did not pay attention to the sexual and racial abuse which the women of colour face. They wrote about African American women but portrayed the woman of colour as inferior. Whatever they wrote was universalized and regarded as truth. They did so because they had agency and power because of which African American women were simply the patient of their deeds.

Therefore, with the rise of women writers like Hurston, Brooks, Angelou, and Morrison the universalizing tendencies of western scholars have been proved biased and incorrect. The works of these writers portray the real life experience of coloured

men and women which the western scholars could not. So, Hurston's works are steady and unromantic concentration on the immediate life experience of women. In *In Their Eyes were Watching God*, Hurston says, "De Whiteman throw down de load and tell de nigger man to pick it up. He pick it up because have to, but he don't tote it. He hand it to his women folks. De nigger women is de mule un de world so far as I can see" (Scott 354). Hurston does not like the tendency of patriarchal society which treats women as inferior and as mules. Likewise, Brooks and Angelou focus on the ordinary day to day scene of African American life. They present the close description of human realities defining Negro life--the realities of frustrated desire and broken hope.

Similarly, Toni Morrison is another writer who deals with the issues of African American people. Her works also depict the intra-racial racism resulting from internalized racism. Morrison provides one of the most chilling portrayals of internalized racism in *The Bluest Eye* (1970), in which Pecola, a young black girl believes she would be pretty, happy and loved if only she had blue eyes. Likewise Morrison's works also offer the insights into literary works by white American writers. Her book *In Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and Literary Imagination*, offers us a very productive approach to reading the white mainstream literature from an African-American perspective. In "African American Criticism" Tyson says, "She reveals the ways in which white texts construct for their own purpose, what she calls the Africanist presence in American history" (391). Morrison uses the words Africanist as "a term for the denotative and connotative blackness that African people have come to signify as well as [...] Eurocentric learning about these people" (Tyson 391). In other words, Africanism in Morrison's sense is a white conception of African American people on which white authors have projected their own fears, needs,

desires, and conflicts. So, she calls for the analysis of the so-called white canonical texts in which African American people have been treated as inferior.

African American feminists find fault in culturally and socially created practices of patriarchal and racist society and try to subvert them. They protest against the forces which relegate them to secondary position. bell hooks in "Theory as Libratory Practice" says:

Concurrently, the efforts of black women to challenge and deconstruct the category "women"- the insistence on recognition that gender is not sole factor determining construction of femaleness [. . .] led to a profound revolution in feminist thought and truly interrogated and disrupted the hegemonic feminist theory produced primarily by academic women, most of whom were white. (29)

She disapproves all types of social constructions which treat them as inferior simply because they are women and belong to African American community.

Sojourner Truth is one of the first and foremost feminists to challenge the assumptions of sexist and racist society about African American women. She speaks for the rights of women. As she was a slave, she knew what it was to be a woman in the racist and sexist society. She shows her dissatisfaction towards the people who question the appropriateness of women's and coloured people's rights. She refutes all the social, cultural and religious myths which relegate women to secondary position. In her essay "Ain't I a Woman?" she says:

Then that little man in black there, he says women can't have as much rights as men; cause Christ wasn't a woman! Where did your Christ come from? Where did your Christ Come from? From God and a woman! Man had nothing to do with Him. (66)

Therefore, Truth wants equality for women in all sectors. In her essay "Keeping the Thing Going While Things are Stirring", she says that men and women should get equal rights. She does not support the idea that men should get more rights because they are superior to women and some places are not fit for women to be in there. She says, "If it is not fit place for women, it is unfit for men to be there" (66).

She believes that not only men of colour but women of colour too should get the rights. If only men are given right, that too would result in inequality, she says:

There is a great stir about colored men getting their rights, but not a word about the colored women; and if colored men get their rights, and not colored women theirs, you see the colored men will be masters over the women, and it will be just as bad as it was before. (66)

So, Truth also speaks about economic inequality which the women of colour face. She says "I have done great deal of work; as much as man, but did not get so much pay" (67). She also requests the men to help female economically until the women are economically independent. She says that males have been denying the rights of females. She says to the male, "You think, like a slaveholder you own us" (67). She thinks that African American women now need to get equal rights as the coloured men have got their freedom from whites. .

Similarly Combahee River Collective is a group of black feminists who have been working since 1974. Since 1974 they have been involved in process of defining and clarifying their politics. They are actively committed to struggle against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression. In "A Black Feminist Statement", they forward their view of African- American feminism as "the logical political movement to combat the manifold and simultaneous oppressions that all women of colour face" (272). They view that politics of African American feminism has an obvious

connection to movements for black liberation, particularly those of the 1960s and 1970s. They say:

It was our experience and disillusionment within these liberation movements, as well as experience on the periphery of the white male left, that led to the need to develop a politics that was antiracist, unlike those of white women, and anti-sexist, unlike those of Black and White men. (273)

Similarly, they opine that African American feminists often talk about their feeling of craziness before becoming conscious of the concepts of sexual politics, patriarchal rule and most importantly, feminism.

They take racial politics and indeed racism to be pervasive factors in the women's lives and these factors did not allow them and still does not allow most coloured women to look more deeply into their own experiences. From that sharing and growing consciousness, they urge women of colour to build a politics that will change their lives and inevitably end their oppression. They assert that African-American women are inherently valuable, and their liberation is necessary not as an adjunct to somebody else's but because of their need as human beings for autonomy.

They argue:

The liberation of African-American women may seem so obvious as to sound simplistic, but it is apparent that no other ostensibly progressive movement has ever considered their specific oppression as a priority or worked seriously for the ending of that oppression. (237)

Likewise, the pejorative stereotype attributed to African American women as mammy, matriarch, sapphire, whore, bulldogger and the ill treatment which African American women receive indicate how little value has been placed upon the coloured

women's lives. So, they believe that African American women should themselves fight against all these stereotypes. They assert that the women of colour should get equal rights.

Although the females in Combahee River Collective are feminists and lesbians, they feel solidarity with progressive black men, who "do not advocate the fractionalization that white women who are separatists demand" (274). They put emphasis on the solidarity of all African American people. Since African American people in general are suppressed, they argue that they should struggle together with coloured men against racism, while they should also fight against men regarding sexism. They also believe that if coloured women were free, it would mean that everyone else is free because their freedom necessitates the elimination of all the systems of oppression.

bell hooks, another remarkable feminist, thinks that we live in a world of crisis--a world governed by politics of domination. Whites dominate and govern the blacks. White people think themselves superior to the blacks. Even the white women who are dominated by the patriarchy and the coloured men who suffer due to racism cannot understand problems of African American women. They homogenize the problems regarding sexism and racism respectively. hooks in her essay "Feminism: A Transformational Politics" says:

Western white women feel that feminist movement should be the central political agenda for females globally. Ideologically, thinking in this direction enables Western women, especially privileged white women, to suggest that racism and class exploitation are merely the offspring of the parent system: patriarchy. (432)

She further argues that western feminist movement in the west has led to the assumption that resisting patriarchal domination is a more legitimate feminist action than resisting racism and other forms of domination. It is necessary to remember, as one thinks about domination, that one has “the capacity to act in ways that oppress, dominate and wound” (433). She asserts that “it is necessary to remember that it is first the potential oppression within that [they] must resist-the potential victim within that [they] must rescue-otherwise [they] cannot hope for an end to domination, for liberation” (433).

So, hooks views that feminists should struggle to end patriarchal domination. She also believes that it should be of primary importance to women and men globally not because it is the foundation of all other oppressive structures but because it is that form of domination that women are most likely to encounter in an ongoing way in everyday life. According to her, to end an oppression woman should work collectively. They should start from home because until and unless the domination at home is eradicated, the domination in other institutionalized forms and relations cannot be stopped. She argues that by working collectively to confront difference, to expand awareness of sex, race, and class as interlocking systems of domination, women can learn the true meaning of solidarity. She also points out that the feminist movement cannot achieve its goal until and unless it addresses the grassroots women and includes their views. She says, “It is this work that must be foundation of feminist movement without it, women can not effectively resist patriarchal domination; without it, women remain estranged and alienated from one another” (436).

hooks also forwards her dissatisfaction towards the tendencies which do not allow black females to speak freely. Even if African American women speak they are not taken seriously. In her essay “Talking Black”, hooks says that the struggle of

African American feminists has been “to make a speech that compels listeners, one that is heard” (15). Madness, not just physical abuse, was the punishment for too much talk if one was black female. But she says that if women want to make their voice heard, they should not be afraid of patriarchal institutions and should write against their domination. She views writing as “a political gesture” (16) that challenges politics of domination.

As hooks views writing as an act of resistance, she questions the norms of patriarchal institution through her writings. In "Feminism: It's a Black Thing", she questions the tendency of coloured men who present subjugation of women of colour as natural, already in place, not something black men create" (1229). She says that “as long as misguided assumption that patriarchal power compensates black males for the trauma of living in a white supremacist society”(1232) is accepted without question, till then the reproduction of sexist thinking and action will remain the norm in African-American life. So she urges all women to write about their experience and interrogate the racist and sexist society.

Likewise, Akasha (Gloria T.) Hull and Barbara Smith are highly regarded feminists who protest against the tendencies which treat women of colour as inferior to men and white women. In “The Politics of Black Women’s Studies” they say that merely using the term black women’s studies is an act “charged with political significance” (20). They opine that using the term and acting on it in a white male world is an "act of political courage" (20). According to them, “Black Women Studies” resists against the ways sexist and racist society portrays women of colour as inferior. They give example of Faulkner who in his novel *Light in August* portrays black nursemaid as idiot and illiterate. They assert:

Not only does his remark typify the extremely negative ways in which Afro-American women have been portrayed in literature, scholarship, and the popular media, but also points to the destructive white-male habit of categorizing all who are not like themselves as their intellectual and moral inferiors.(21)

They also think that politics of “Black Women’s Studies” is totally connected to the politics of African American women's lives. The opportunities for African American women to carry out autonomously defined investigations of self in society have been limited by patriarchal society. They also see the women's movement as failure as it did not address the problems of African American women. Furthermore, due to the increasing involvement of single, middle-class white women (who often had the most time to devote to political work), the divisive campaigns of white-male media, and the movement’s serious inability to deal with racism, “the women’s movement became largely and apparently white”(22).

They argue that African American feminism has made a space for “Black Women’s Studies” to exist. They assert that the commitment of “Black Women’s Studies” towards women of colour will provide the basis of survival for them. Only a black and feminist analysis can sufficiently comprehend the materials of “Black Women's Studies” and only a creative African American feminist perspective will enable the field to expand. Barbara Smith in “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism” puts her view that the politics of feminism has a direct relationship to the state of black women's literature. She states that African American feminist movement would open up the space needed for the exploration of black women's lives. She charges white women of being ill-equipped to deal with the subtleties of racial politics. So, African American feminist approach to literature that embodies the “realization that

the politics of sex as well as the politics of race and class are crucially interlocking factors in the works of black women writers is an absolute necessity" (170).

Barbara Smith's text "Introduction to Home Girls: Black Feminist Anthology" charges black men and some black women for developing a set of myths to divert black women from their freedom. These myths are: the coloured woman is already liberated, racism is the primary (or only) oppression women have to confront, feminism is nothing but man-hating, women's issues are narrow, apolitical concerns, and the last myth is the most pernicious myth which states that "feminist[s] are nothing but lesbians" (496). Smith falsifies all the myths and says that African American feminism provides the theory that clarifies the nature of black women's experience.

Similarly, Anna Julia Cooper also sheds light on the position of women of colour. Her essay "From a Voice of the South: By a Black Woman of the South" states that the colored woman of today occupies a unique position in America. She says that in a transitional and unsettled period, the status of coloured women is least ascertainable and definitive of all the forces which make the American civilization. African American women are confronted by both a woman question and a race problem, and are yet an unknown or an unacknowledged factor in both. Likewise Mary Ann Weathers in her essay "An Argument for Black Women's Liberation as a Revolutionary Force" urges all the women to fight their battles themselves: "Nobody can fight your battles for you; you have to do it yourself" (176). She requests all the African American women not to be intimidated by the charges like 'matriarchs'. African American women should not let themselves be abused by males and the myths created by them.

Similarly Alice Walker is recognized as one of the leading voices among African American writers. She explores the paralyzing effects of being a woman in a world that virtually ignore issues like black on black oppression and female victimization. Walker continues to express her wish creatively for wholeness of those who have been erased from history, torn from their racial heritage, silenced, mutilated and denied freedom. In her book *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* she defines her feminist stance as a womanist. She defines womanist as:

A Woman who loves other women, sexually and/or non sexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counter balance of laughter), and women's strength. Some time loves individual men sexually and/or non sexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally universalistic [...] womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender. (XI)

Walker believes that writers have power to save lives of people. To save the lives of people writers should raise voice against the evils of society. She raises the evils of slavery in her works. In her essay "Choosing to Stay at Home" she compares racism with "creeping kudzu vine that swallows whole forest and abandoned houses" (165).

Walker too says that coloured women are treated as the mule and have been handed down the burdens that every one else has refused to carry. Even the coloured men and white women do not understand the plight of coloured women. They do not care about the emotions of coloured women. She in her book *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* says:

When we have pleaded for understanding, our character has been distorted; when we have asked for simple caring, we have been handed empty inspirational appellations, then stuck in the farthest corner.

When we have asked for love, we have been given children. (237)

Walker believes personal and social change. She believes that act of writing is itself a powerful tool for bringing about change in society. Therefore her works depict the racial and sexual abuses of women. She wants to bring awareness among people through her writing. Walker participated in Civil Rights Movement for equality of all and protested against the segregation. Unlike many radical feminists, Walker believes in universalism. She does not promote the politics of separatism. She asserts that men and women are the requirements of society. She does not protest against males but against the evils of patriarchal system. Her works also explore the issues of motherhood, sexual exploitation of women, female experiences, individual identity of coloured women and how embracing and bonding with other women affects the health of her community at large.

Alice Walker's novel *Meridian* also centers on the issues of motherhood and female experiences. This novel depicts the guilt felt by the protagonist Meridian. She feels guilty regarding her birth and her abandonment of her child. She is further troubled by her inability to kill others for the Civil Rights Movement. Meridian is released from the guilt through the realization of her own strength, which lies in her unwavering courage and through selfless work on the behalf of her community. The above-mentioned feminist discourse helps us to explore the guilt felt by the protagonist and her release from the guilt.

### III. Atonement and Release in Alice Walker's *Meridian*

Alice Walker's *Meridian* explores the life of a woman who suffers from the guilt. Meridian Hill, the protagonist of the novel feels guilty for being born to the mother who is already troubled due to the loss of her freedom. She thinks that she is "shattering her mother's emerging self" (Walker 51). She also feels guilty for abandonment of her child. She has "nightmares of the child, Rundi, calling to her" (91). Meridian is also troubled due to the fact that she can die for the movement but is not able to "kill for the Revolution" (27).

Meridian Hill is the representative of African American women in general. Meridian, despite all the difficulties, emerges as a woman who understands her strength and works for the betterment of the colored people. Walker posits Meridian in this light as the representative of all the women who want to uplift their community. Her journey begins with her personal transformation when she sets out alone to fight her own battles through personal struggle and Civil Rights work.

However, the patriarchal society always sets standards for women because they have agency in their hands. Meridian's life is shaped by those moments when she remains silent but peoples around her force her to speak and confirm to the values set by the society. She cannot publicly repent, despite her mother's urgings; she cannot utter the patriotic speech she is assigned in high school; and she cannot proclaim that she will kill for the revolution when her comrades expect her to. She is tormented by her peers' hissing: "[w]hy don't you say something?" and by the memory of her mother pleading, "[s]ay it now, Meridian" (29). Her refusal to speak negates the system which treats woman as a doll. But Meridian's strategy does not prevent her from feeling guilt both for not confirming to the standards of her family and friends, and for not being able to speak out effectively against these standards. These so-called

standards, which women have to follow, are constructed by patriarchal society. The patriarchal system craves for self scarification and devotion from women. Even women, who do not recognize their own ability and power, think that standard set by patriarchal system is fair. Therefore, they develop a feeling of inferiority if they are unable to act according to fixed standards. This is what Gramsci calls hegemony. The same is the case with Meridian until she recognizes her strength.

From the early days of her life Meridian has developed a "feeling of guilt" (49), which haunts her: "Meridian was conscious always of a feeling of guilt, even as a child" (49). Meridian feels that by being born to her mother she is only adding to the miseries which her mother already had. Before marriage her mother was an independent woman with "delight in her independence" (49). But her mother developed a feeling that the mothers of her student were more jubilant and satisfied than herself. So she married. Though Meridian's father was an honest and helpful person, her mother realizes late that by being married "she was caught and her personal life was over" (50). She understands that the secret joy which she thought all the mothers of her pupil enjoyed is "simply a full knowledge of the fact that they were dead [. . .] walled away from life, brick by brick" (51). Such was the condition of her mother when she was born that makes her feel guilty which is reflected in her tone: "It was for stealing her mother's serenity, for shattering her mother's emerging, that Meridian felt guilty from the very first, though she was unable to understand how this could possibly be her fault" (51). Meridian acts in such away that when her mother, Mrs. Hill asks her, "Have you stolen anything?"(51), stillness falls over her and for seconds she cannot move. The question "literally stopped her in tracks" (51).

Meridian is the only child in the family who feels this guilt. She feels guilty as she is a woman and can understand another woman's feelings and emotions. Although

Mrs. Hill thinks that she performs all her duties as a mother, she is not able to perform her duties due to the unhappiness of losing her freedom after marriage. Despite fulfilling her duties as a religious woman and praying for her children's soul, she seems to have no understanding of her children or their struggles. Mrs. Hill cares of superficial things like ironing and washing her children's clothes but is not able to provide love and affection to her children: "[I]n the ironing of her children's clothes she expended all the energy she might have put into openly loving them" (79). Thus it can be said that Walker believes that the shackles, which the patriarchal system puts on woman's freedom and liberty, do not allow woman to act wisely.

As in patriarchal system women are treated inferior and are not educated the basic things, which they need to know for survival, Meridian is ignorant about the basic issue like sex. Meridian is emotionally starved shut due to the patriarchal system. Her mother is not able to tell her anything about sex because Mrs. Hill herself faces problems in male dominated society. Meridian only learns about sex when she gets molested in a local funeral home. Meridian begins her relationship with Eddie mainly because she wants a boy friend to protect her from all the other men around. And the demise of their relationship comes about when Eddie finally notices that Meridian does not enjoy sex with him. This simply clarifies that in male dominated society women are only taken as sex objects.

Similarly, in the patriarchal society the woman who rejects a pregnancy clearly does not know her place. In the chapter entitled "The Happy Mother" Walker examines maternity's effect on Meridian. Now she is a young wife and mother, everyone thinks of her as a "perfect woman [and] an exemplary young mother". She is, in fact, nearly dead. Whereas the people around her think that she is concentrating

on her child, she is actually considering different "methods of killing herself" (69) and murdering her own child:

Rebelling, she began to dream each night, just before her baby sent out his cries, of ways to murdering him. She sat in the rocker Eddie had bought and stroked her son's back, her fingers eager to scratch him out of her life [. . .] the thought of murdering her own child eventually frightened her. To suppress it she conceived, quite consciously, methods of killing herself. (69)

Though she cannot commit suicide or murder her own child, the thought of committing suicide enables her to "function very well" (70).

Walker explores the psychology of a girl who does not know how to react to her situation and the responsibilities that a patriarchal institution has fixed for women. After being pregnant she is expelled from the school. At the age of seventeen, Meridian is left on her own to consider what to do with her life and her child's as well. She resents her own condition, and like her mother, she also resents the fact that no one allows her to acknowledge her negative feelings. She spends her time at home, reading magazines which portray women as inferior: "She reads *Sepia*, *Tan*, *True confessions*, *Real Romances* and *Jet*. According to these magazines, woman is a mindless body, a sex creature, something to hang false hair and nails on" (71). Here Meridian's awareness of patriarchy's desire to encase her, to mould her according to its needs, becomes acute. Finally when Meridian says no to motherhood to join Saxon College she offends and loses her own mother, her family, and her community. Meridian thinks that she is not mature enough to take care of the child but her mother dismisses her decision on moral grounds:

Well, it can't be moral, that I know. It can't right to give away your own child. If the good Lord gives you a child he means for you to take care of it [. . .] do you know how many women have thought that [. . .] you have surprised me. I always thought you were a good girl. (87)

Through Meridian Walker asserts that all the women must resist patriarchal domination and live by their own standards not by the laws set by patriarchal system. Meridian at the age of seventeen is not active. She seems to have no hope. Her existence is characterized by a numbing lethargy.

She becomes activated only when the house of some civil rights worker is demolished by a fire bomb: "Something about the bombing had attracted her, the obliteration of the house, the knowledge that had for seen this destruction". The incident spurs Meridian to volunteer for the cause. Meridian's mother disapproves of Meridian's radical political activities because her mother has accepted the dominance of whites and also of patriarchy. She believes that Meridian has "wasted a year [. . .], fooling around with those people [. . .] God separated the sheep's from the goats and the black folks from the white" (85). Finally when Meridian is offered a scholarship to Saxon College she gives up her child to join the college. Thus, Meridian takes the first revolutionary step. She stops living by others' standards and learns to bloom for herself, as she must in order to survive, since her rebellious acts will alienate her from the rest of society. Meridian even changes the name of her child from Eddie Jr. to Rundi. She says, "You will no longer be called Eddie Jr. I'll ask them to call you Rundi, after no person, I hope, who has ever lived". Again Walker forwards her view that everyone should have his/her own existence. Finally when she gives away her child she does so "with alight heart [. . .] believing she had saved a small person's life" (91). Meridian views that she has done the right thing because she is unable even to

take care of herself properly. Walker thus explores the condition of African American women who are pregnant early and the whole responsibility of the child is only upon women.

While at Saxon College, Meridian contributes for the Civil Rights Movement. But time and again she is haunted by the feeling of guilt. Even though she knows her child is better off without his seventeen year old mother, Meridian cannot forgive herself for giving him away. She feels that she has abandoned both her son and her own heritage:

Meridian knew that enslaved women [. . .] had laid down their lives, gladly, for their children that the daughters of these enslaved women had thought their greatest blessing from "Freedom" was that it meant they could keep their own children. And what had Meridian Hill done with her precious child she had given him away. (91)

Thus, she thinks of herself as not belonging to the maternal history and of her mother belonging and "being worthy of this maternal history" (91). She feels as if she cheated her community.

Likewise, Walker through the depiction of Saxon College shows her dissatisfaction towards institutions which do not let women act as an independent person. Even after joining Saxon College Meridian cannot find any relief. The college imposes "lady hood" (39) upon its students. They have to learn "to make French food, English tea and German music" (39). The students in Saxon College are supposed to follow the principles of white ladies, which require them to be "by definition virgins" (94). And just as Saxon slaves were kept on the plantation, Saxon students are trapped within the campus's fence. The magnolia tree which is named Sojourner is the only complex and meaningful centering point on this otherwise artificial campus.

Generations of students have handed down stories and folk practices concerning The Sojourner. The first is the story of Louvine, the slave woman who plants Sojourner. She unintentionally frightens her master's young son to death with a tale he and his sister request. She buries her tongue under Sojourner after her master cuts it off. According to slaves' folk beliefs, Louvine transferred her capacity for powerful speech onto The Sojourner. Walker gives the name Sojourner to magnolia tree to remind us one of the greatest and foremost African-American feminist, Sojourner Truth, who raised voice against the oppression of women of colour. Susan Wills says, "Named The Sojourner, the magnolia conjures up the presence of another leader of black women, who, like Louvine, used language in the struggle for liberation" (2). Walker through Louvine and image of Sojourner Truth gives examples of women who use their tongue as weapons in the struggle for liberation. Master Saxon's punishment, however, is an equally instructive example for Meridian. While it is possible to use one's tongue to combat a racist patriarchy, that system will endeavor to silence such a tongue, even if it must cut it off at the root.

Walker even views silence as a means of resistance against patriarchy which wants to dictate women according to its own terms and conditions. At those moments when Meridian is expected to reproduce patriarchal discourse in the form of public repentance during a church service or a patriotic speech at her high school, she remains "silent on the stage" as both a symbolic rupture of patriarchal ideology and as means of preserving her tongue, preventing it from being cut out.

Similarly, in patriarchal society the views of women are not regarded worth considering. Meridian does not get any comfort from guilt even during the protest against segregation policies of whites. While working for the Movement, she is required to "kill for the revolution" (28). Meridian can die for the cause but cannot

kill, while all her friends commit both to die and kill for the revolution. To Meridian even killing during revolution is "murder" (28). She asks if she kills for the revolution, "what will the music be like" (28). When she silently considers whether she could kill another human being, the group becomes hostile towards her and finally excludes her. Killing, for Meridian as well as for Walker, is an act of tyranny even if one kills in the fight against tyranny.

Not too surprisingly, Meridian's feeling of guilt does not abandon her. Even though Meridian convinces herself that by leaving her child she has saved her child's life, the feeling of guilt is kept alive by the voice of her mother which repeats patriarchal scripts about mothering: "You should want Eddie Jr. [. . .] unless you are some kind of monster. And no daughter of mine is monster, surely". In the college different incidents exacerbate her feeling of guilt. One of the incidents that troubles her even more is the condition of thirteen-year old girl, Wild Child during her pregnancy. People call the girl Wild Child because she behaves and dresses in a wild manner. Meridian feels necessary to help Wild Child and brings her back to her room at Saxon. To Meridian Wild Child embodies the opposite of every Saxon ideal and demonstrates the falseness of Saxon's social codes: "Wile Chile shouted words that were never uttered in the honors house" (36) The Wild Child's display of behavior is not tolerated at the honors house by the authorities of honor house: "She must not stay here" (37). Frightened, the Wild Child escapes from the unapproving house, only to be struck and killed by a car. The Wild Child is dangerous to Saxon's reputation that it does not allow its students to have funeral service for the Wild Child. The reaction of the Saxon-College again asserts that it only wants to impose ladyhood upon its students. The college does not care about the education of their minds. Although the fellow students are overwhelmed with the urge to rebel, they are already so far long

the road to ladyhood that they do not know how to do it. As a result, the students destroy the Sojourner. Their ultimate act of revolutionary violence is directed towards their most beloved part of the campus. Despite Meridian's protests, they chop down the Sojourner: "[I]n a fury of confusion and frustration they worked all night and, and chopped and sawed down, level to the ground, that mighty, ancient, sheltering music tree" (48). So Walker gives an example of this kind of destruction that can take place when the revolutionary anger has no effective outlet. The death of Wild Child hurts Meridian and adds insult to the injury.

Meridian being a woman has tried to help another woman but all her efforts go in vain. Meridian in a way recognizes herself with the problems faced by another woman during her pregnancy. The first sight of the pregnant thirteen-year old has a mysterious effect in Meridian: She is seen "lying like a corpse on the floor beside her bed, eyes closed and hands limp at her sides" (36). Again Walker through Meridian asserts that only woman can understand women. It is difficult to take positive step in patriarchal society. Walker argues that women should not be discouraged by the hurdles of patriarchy and resist against the domination.

Meridian's attempts at personal growth through a love relationship also fails. She has sexual relationship with Truman, whom she loves. But Truman is attracted towards Lynne, a white Jew girl. After Truman deserts Meridian, she becomes aware of her pregnancy. She decides to abort and finally gets her tubes tied. She does not tell Truman about her pregnancy and her abortion because she thinks Truman "might have the nerve to pity her" (115). Meridian does not want pity from Truman because she wants respect. Meridian's wish for respect and not pity represents the wish of all women of colour and all human beings at large. When Lynne leaves Truman again proposes Meridian but she rejects: "She turned away, shame for him, for what he was

revealing, made her sick" (115). Later Truman marries to Lynne who is attracted by her whiteness. Meridian's failure in love does not let her forget the past as her feeling of guilt keeps on increasing day by day. With the failure of her relation with Truman, Meridian is haunted by a recurring dream:

She dreamed she was a character in a novel and that her existence presented an insoluble problem, one that would be solved only by her death at the end [. . .] even when she gave up reading novels that encouraged such a solution- and nearly all of them die- the dream did not cease. (117)

Walker believes that the personal and social change can be achieved only through the unity of women and their ability to understand each other. As Meridian is unable to alleviate herself from the guilt, she falls ill. Blinded, anorexic and paralyzed, Meridian appears to Anne-Marion to be "slipping away" (119).

Meridian cannot find any way to relieve her of the guilt. It is at this point Miss Winters rises to the scene. As a mother she helps Meridian. Miss Winters recalls Meridian's high school speech on the U.S. constitution, an oration which Meridian is incapable of concluding. While this spontaneous rebellion is the cause of rift between Meridian and her mother, Miss Winters remembers it as a stance to be respected and more importantly to be remembered. Miss Winters is the only member of the audience who truly understands Meridian's struggle against the hegemonic discourse of the speech. She had told her not to worry about the speech: "It's the same one they made me learn when I was here [. . .] and it's no more true now than it was then" (122).

Miss Winters had broken the custom of accepting the speech by admitting to Meridian that, although she had once recited the words she had not believed they were true. At that moment Miss Winters's words of kindness had gone unnoticed by Meridian, who

then was obsessed with her mother's disappointment with her performance. Miss Winters understands the problems that a woman has to face while negating patriarchal values.

Meridian feels completely weighed down by guilt for not living to her mother's standards: "It seemed to Meridian that her legacy from her mother's endurance [. . .], was one she would never be able to match" (124). It is this knowledge that allows Miss Winters to take on the role of mediator, even the role of surrogate mother. She understands the psychology of Meridian who is craving for forgiveness from her mother. Miss Winters replies positively when Meridian in her delirium requests her mother to let her go:

She dreamed she was on a ship with her mother, and her mother was holding her over the railing about to drop her into the sea.

Danger was all around and her mother refused to let her go.

"Mama, I love you. Let me go," she whispered, licking the salt from her mother black arms [. . .]. Instinctively, as if Meridian were her own child, Miss Winter answered, close to her ear on the pillow, "I forgive you." (124-25)

This act of Miss Winters has a positive effect on Meridian. She feels relief. Walker in her works stresses on the unity of women. Women should work collectively to gain as equal respect as men. Walker does not protest against males but against their segregation policies. In this novel as well Walker is not protesting against males but against their discrimination of women. The forgiveness given by Meridian to Truman proves that she does not hate men.

One of Meridian's most difficult struggles is to forgive herself for her perceived failings, which are her duties as a mother and a daughter. If she can learn to

love and respect herself, she can see her moments of silence as legitimate acts of rebellion against a system that would deny her individuality. Meridian starts her journey of personal transformation when she decides to live on her own, separated from her family and the group of revolutionary friends. 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 respect [. . .] and [. . .] I am entering my social into a struggle that will most certainly transform the experience of all the peoples of the earth, as no other movement can [. . .] because the movement into self-love, self respect, and self determination is [. . .] now galvanizing [. . .] the unarguable major of human beings every where. (Pifer 1)

To her credit, Meridian manages to escape the symbolic death of being killed by patriarchy's standards and accepts the sacredness of her own life.

When Truman returns to Meridian after the three years of marriage with Lynne and asks for "another chance" (139), Meridian rejects him. She says, "For Lynne's sake alone, I couldn't do it [. . .] what does she have now besides you?" (139). Meridian understands the plight of another woman who had abandoned her parents to marry Truman. As she herself knows what it is to be patient of patriarchal system, she raises voice for another woman, Lynne who belongs to minority due to the fact that she is a Jew. Though Lynne belongs to the white community, she has her own troubles being a Jew and a woman. Meridian well and truly knows what it is to be a woman in a sexist and racist society. Although Meridian also loved Truman once and had a kind of rivalry with Lynne regarding Truman, she does not let her past affect her decision. She selflessly speaks and acts on the behalf of Lynne.

Similarly, Walker through the triangular love relation of Meridian, Truman and Lynne also depicts how racism affects the life of African American women and causes them to feel inferior. Truman, though himself belongs to African American community, craves for white women like Lynne: "He had wanted to make love [. . .] because she was white" (157). Truman is attracted by their whiteness and their habits like "read[ing] The New York Times" (143). Besides, Truman wants a woman who is "a virgin [. . .] perfect in all the eyes of the world, not a savage who bore her offspring and hid it" (142). Truman later realizes the absurdity of his desire for a white woman. He feels that he does not "owe Lynne" (140) the way he does to Meridian and she makes him feel "healthy and purposeful" (140). Truman asserts that he should have married Meridian not Lynne: "You're [. . .] the woman I should have married and didn't" (140). Though Meridian does not reject Truman's arguments, she is aware of the bonding that she and Lynne share as women.

Therefore, despite the rivalry of Meridian and Lynne over Truman, the same sense of maternal loss ultimately brings them together and cements Meridian's alliance with Truman's Jewish wife, Lynne, after the murder of Lynne's daughter Camara. Instead of driving them apart, immense suffering Truman causes them brings the two women closer. After the marriage, Truman and Lynne live together in the black community. Living among coloured people she helps and supports their movement. She marches with them in their movement. But after the shooting off of Tommy Odds' arm she is "excluded from the marches" (Walker 138) and the meetings. Tommy Odds develops even more hatred towards whites. And as Lynne belongs to white community, Odds even sees her as a culprit. He does not even want to hear her name: "Don't mention that bitch to me [. . .] all white people are mother fuckers. I want to see them destroyed" (132). Tommy Odds then takes a step which

depicts evil side of patriarchal system. He rapes Lynne. Walker does not single mindedly depict the colored people as a model of honesty. She also depicts the evil side of coloured people when Tommy Odds rapes Lynne. She does not support the act of violence. Walker is "committed to survival and wholeness of entire people" (XI).

Walker again conveys her message of need of unity and harmony among women through the efforts of Meridian. Meridian provides solace to Lynne after Truman deserts her and her daughter Camara dies. After the death of Camara, Truman and Lynne seek the help of Meridian. In this process the relationship between Lynne and Meridian gets deep because they both share motherhood and womanhood:

"Sometimes they talked intimately, like sisters [. . .] the absence of the child [. . .] was what had finally brought them together" (173-174). Thus, Walker presents now Meridian as a woman who has matured enough to help Lynne for loss she has suffered. Earlier Meridian herself was a woman who was in crisis due to the abandonment of her child. But now she has developed a deeper level of consciousness as has matured both mentally and physically. Lynne's condition after Camera's death also helps her in understanding her responsibilities as a human being and more importantly as a woman. Through this incidence, Walker conveys her message of unity that women need to develop to overcome the problems coming in their ways. This incident also helps Meridian feel better, as she has comforted the women troubled by the loss of motherhood.

Meridian learns to value her own life and sees through the idea of martyrdom when she finds the community that has desire to live. She finds such a community in a black church where a commemorative service is being held for a young man who has been killed "for his talk alone" (196). Until this day she had believed that love would

be enough to change the world. The father of dead young boy had loved his son, but love alone had not been enough to prevent his murder:

He had thought that somehow, the power of his love alone (and how rare even he knew it was!) would save his son. But his love-selfless, open, a kissing, touching love-had only made his son strong enough to resist every thing that was not love [ . . . ] he had set out to change the ways of the world his father feared. And they had murdered him (197)

But now Meridian understands the need for resistance against oppression.

Surprisingly she promises the old man that "she would kill, before she allowed anyone to murder his son again" (200).

The church Meridian attends this time is not like the conventional churches she attended as a small girl which imposed its beliefs. Rather this church has "changed the music" (195). It urges to stand up for the rights and resist against the unfair system. In this church Meridian acquires a new sense of community and "the tribal consciousness" (Tucker 14). This church has been revitalized, re-appropriated, and has become a place that possesses "triumphant forcefulness of the oddly death-defying music" (Walker 195). The minister of the church is also different. He speaks in the voice of Martin Luther King and Meridian sees this, imitation not as a mockery but as a means of "keeping that voice alive [ . . . ] and preacher's voice-not his own voice at all, but rather the voice of millions who could not longer speak" (196). Listening to the congregation's hymn Meridian finally achieves spiritual release and transformation: "[S]he understood, finally, that the respect she owed her life was to continue, against whatever obstacles, to live it, and not to give up [ . . . ] without a fight to death, preferably not her own" (200).

Now Meridian develops love towards herself and her life, the same life which she intended to finish off earlier. She has self realization that she needs to love herself to be able to love others she also realizes that by loving herself and giving value to her life she can help other people who are suffering. Now she gives up the idea of martyrdom and has respect for life:

King should have refused, Malcolm too should have refused. All those characters in all those novels that require death to end the book should refuse. All the saints should walk away. Do their bit, than just walk away. See Europe, visit Hawaii, become agronomists or raise

Dalmation. She didn't care what they did, but they should do it. (151)

Through Meridian Walker asserts the fact that all women must value their life and realize their strengths because until and unless women learn to value their life they cannot live a life of dignity and self respect. Although Meridian recognizes the obligation to kill, she does not adopt the philosophy of murdering. Instead, she in a way transcends the philosophy of murdering and says: "Perhaps it will be my part to walk behind the real revolutionaries [. . .] and when they stop to wash off the blood [. . .] I will come forward and sing from memory songs they will need once more to hear" (201). Now Meridian begins to heal even more and decides to work selflessly on the behalf of the women and her community and values her life. She realizes that to get respect from others she needs to respect herself first. Women should look into themselves and workout their ways.

So, Meridian at last finds her voice. And now she can speak out against racist patriarchal hegemony which makes women of colour feel inferior. She feels that rich and racist people of the world "should stand in fear of her" (201). She has now gathered the strength to "bring mightiest country to its knees" (201). Meridian lives

among the coloured people in their community. In this community she finds a home and she works on the behalf of this community. Chicokema is a town so segregated that even events as trivial as a carnival exhibition require separate days for black and white attendance. The segregation exists on the level of occupation as well. The people who do not have to work in guano plant claim that "the folks that do smell so bad that they can't stand to be in the same place with 'em" (19). The people who are powerful even "throw in the children"(20) to work in the guano plant. The children of Chicokema have been negatively socialized to believe that they are inferior to other children. Meridian comes to Chicokema to help these children, not by making speech, but by silently lining them up to see the Marilene O'shay exhibit on a day when whites are only permitted. She places herself at the front of the line and marches across the square. The town has got a "big old army tank" (18), which was brought to Chicokema during the sixties when the "white felt under attack from outside agitators -those members of the black community who thought equal rights for all should extent to black" (18). The police prepare to aim the target on Meridian who is marching with the children. Meridian waits for the police to arrange themselves before she steps in front of the tank and leads the children to see Marilene O'shay. The defenders cannot fire at Meridian and simply stare at Meridian in disbelief. Without speaking a word, Meridian succeeds in desegregating the O'Shay exhibition. The act of facing up to the town's white segregationist army and entering the forbidden circus becomes a memory and inspiration for children.

Moreover, through the exhibition of the dead body of O' Shay by her husband, Walker also questions the patriarchy's evils. The husband of dead Marilene O'Shay uses her dead body even after her death. He advertises the dead body of his wife as "Dead for Twenty Five Years, Preserved in Life Like Condition" (19). Three titles

painted on the wagon carrying O'Shay sum up the narrow possibilities for women in a patriarchal society: "Obedient Daughter, "Devoted Wife," and Adoring Mother" (19). The fourth, "Gone Wrong" (19), indicates the tragedy when a woman rejects these roles. Although the husband of O'Shay shoots the man who has sexual relationship with his wife, he does not shoot his wife. He chooses to strangle his wife with his own hands. Later even the law forgives him: "[e]xplained everything to the [au]thorities up there and they forgive him" (22). Here, Walker reveals the situation of women in male dominated society. A woman is punished if she does not confirm the standards but a man is allowed to do everything with his wife. Walker shows the commodification of women by men even after the death of women as Stein regards to commodification of O'Shay by her husband as "profitable specular commodity" (129). Later when Truman calls Meridian's act as "useless [and] meaningless action" (26); she disagrees with him. She believes that through her act the children discovered the truth. "She was a fake. They discovered that [ . . . ] she was made of plastics" (26). Thus Meridian brings awareness among children. She also uncovers the conspiracy of the husband of O'Shay who wants to earn money through commodification of even the dead body of Marilene O'Shay, his wife. Her act of working for the African-American people and for the women gives her joy. She has left behind the idea of dying and has resolved to live. When Truman asks her if she could die for any abstract cause her reply is: "What you see before you is a woman in the process of changing her mind" (25). Her remarks clearly suggest that she loves her life and desires to live. She is even getting over her guilt and mysterious illness that causes her swooning and paralysis. She does not need doctor to get well. She reveals to Truman, "I don't need one. I am getting much better by myself [ . . . ] see; the paralysis is going away already" (26). Meridian thus insists on self realization and believes in her self to overcome her problems.

Likewise, Meridian also acts on the behalf of African American community in a small town in Alabama. She works to end the flooding that menaces the children. There is a large ditch in the town and in the rainy season the ditch gets filled up. But the children love to play in the ditch which they call "the pool" (190). After the federal government orders to open the "public white swimming pool" (190) to the coloured people as well, the city officials, who are all rich and who have their own private swimming pools close the swimming pool. So despite the warnings of their parents, the African American children play in the pool. The officials have also erected a huge reservoir "very near the lower-lying black neighborhood" (190). When the water of the reservoir rises due to the heavy raining, the excess is allowed to drain off in any direction. Since this is done without warning, the "[d]isobedient children caught wading in the pool [are] knocked off their feet and drown" (190). The people of the African American community accept their fate and do not protest. As a result the mothers of child who loose their child sit with each other and remember their lost child. When Meridian comes to this town she protests against the segregation and leads them to the mayor's office, "bearing in her arm the bloated figure of a five-year-old-boy" (191) who had drowned in the pool. She brings awareness among people and tells them to "use the vote" (191) to attain their rights. Thus, Meridian again helps her community and makes them conscious of their rights and power. Her act also provides solace to the mothers who have lost their children and to herself who is recovering from the guilt. The motherhood brings Meridian closer to women. Walker again gives the message of sisterhood to women and the message of humanism to all the people.

As Walker, Meridian does not hate the people but the system that segregates one human from the other. When Truman again returns and says, "[he] wants [her] to love" (216), Meridian calmly replies him: "But I do love you [. . .] my love for you

changed" (216). Meridian forgives Truman for every thing he has done and can love him but not as a lover. Meridian's decision to forgive Truman embodies Walker's love for humanity. Therefore Meridian forgives Truman when she realizes that Truman wants forgiveness. Meridian even transcends her feeling of guilt.

I want to put an end to guilt

I want to put an end to shame

Whatever you have done my sister (my brothers)

Know I wish to forgive you. (213)

Now strong enough to leave herself chosen cell, she prepares to move on. She discards her cap which she had worn due to the falling of her hair. Her "newly grown hair frames her thin, resolute face" (219). Her newly growing hairs also hint at the revival of Meridian's spirit. The photograph of reviving tree is sign of Meridian's reviving health. Like the Sojourner, she can grow towards a new life. Meridian leaves the room. Truman now feels that he must resist the conflict which Meridian has freed herself and "lived through" (220).

Finally, Walker does not blame motherhood for the wastage of women's lives. She unlike many radical feminists does not present motherhood itself as restrictive. The mothers are helpless only in the society which does not give value to motherhood and in the society which does not acknowledge women feelings. Walker portrays that a mother in such a society is often "buried alive" walled away from her own life, brick by brick" (51). So Walker presents Meridian as a woman who does not object to mothers bearing children or to children, but to a role woman is expected to play once she becomes a mother. According to this role, a mother should sacrifice her individual personality and concerns in order to live for her children and society. Unfortunately, the only way Meridian can escape this unwanted role is to leave her child and family,

accepting her mother's disapproval. And to do so she must learn to overcome her guilt, from which she suffers.

Thus, Walker presents Meridian as a woman who overcomes her guilt by self realization and by the good works which she does for her community. Now Meridian is the woman who respects her life and is committed to survival of all people.

Meridian is an example of female awareness because she serves as a catalyst to bring awareness among people. As Meridian grows to value and understand herself, she heads to lead as well as to help the African American community and all the troubled mothers.

#### IV. Conclusion

In *Meridian*, Walker presents the life of a woman who is troubled by the feeling of guilt. Firstly she feels guilty for being born to her mother. She thinks that by being born to her mother she is only adding to her troubles. Her guilt reflects collective suffering of African American women. She believes that her birth has shattered her mother's dreams. Hence, Meridian is an example of a woman who understands another woman's problems and is concerned about her well being. She is also troubled by her decision of abandoning her own child. She tries to console herself by reasoning that by leaving her child she has saved his life because firstly she cannot even take care of herself properly and taking care of her child is beyond her access. But the feeling that she has insulted motherhood does not abandon her. She is haunted by the feeling that in the past slave women thought their greatest freedom in having their children with themselves but she herself has abandoned her child. She is also troubled due to the exclusion by the revolutionaries when she confirms that she can die but cannot promise to kill others for the cause of Civil Rights Movement. Meridian cannot act freely due to the feeling of guilt that leads to paralysis. The mysterious disease also causes the hair fall.

Despite her sufferings, Meridian overcomes her feeling of guilt through self realization and the social works she does for the troubled people. By doing so, Meridian learns to value her life. She also understands the need to respect herself in order to proceed ahead. Thus, Walker presents Meridian as an example of female awareness.

But in the personal level, Meridian's decision is not respected by the people who want her to conform to the standards of patriarchy. Meridian prefers silence than repeating the tradition of patriarchy which subordinates women. Due to the problems

faced by women in patriarchal society sometimes they cannot act wisely. Meridian gets pregnant quite early and forced to leave school. She can neither love her child nor can she understand value of her life. Thoughts like murdering her child and committing suicide come into her mind. When Meridian finally decides to abandon her child her mother does not support her.

Lastly, Meridian sets out alone to fight her own battle after her failure in love relation with Truman. Truman rejects Meridian as she is black and develops the relationship with Lynne who is white. Though Truman belongs to African American community, he prefers the girl from white community. This incident also troubles Meridian. The Saxon College which Meridian joins does not pay attention to the intellectual growth of its students. Rather the college only imposes ladyhood upon the students. Therefore, Meridian starts living in the African American community and helps them. She comforts Lynne after the death of her daughter. The feeling of motherhood and womanhood brings Meridian and Lynne closer to each other. Though Meridian was once troubled by motherhood, she has now matured enough to help another woman in need. Her act also helps herself to feel better as she has helped the woman troubled by the loss of motherhood.

Meridian also develops a kind of love for herself when she enters the black church. People in the church have desire to live. The minister of the church speaks in voice of Martin Luther King and raises the voice for people who cannot speak. She finally learns that she needs to respect her life and see through the idea of martyrdom. She understands the need to survive and fight against the discrimination. She feels dying cannot bring an end to the miseries. She also realizes the strength that lies in her unwavering courage. Her health also starts recovering after she realizes her strength that she possesses as woman. Meridian works for the betterment of African American

people and urges them to use their voting rights to overcome their problems. Lastly she forgives Truman and other people who have troubled her. She believes in forgiveness. Meridian represents Walker's philosophy that there should not be segregation among human beings.

Thus, Walker presents Meridian as representative of all women who have desire to contribute to their community. Walker asserts that all women should realize their strengths and should learn to respect their lives. Women should not be troubled by patriarchal standards but should resist the evils of patriarchy and work for the betterment of whole human beings.

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