

Chapter One

Introduction

I. Alice Walker: A Biographical Sketch

Alice Walker is a prominent American novelist. She is well-known as one of the leading voices among black American writers. Walker began her writing in a small rural town of Eatonton, Georgia. She was the youngest of eight children of impoverished sharecroppers. Her both parents were storytellers. Walker was especially influenced by her mother whom she described in *Our Mothers' Gardens* as a walking history of our community.

A childhood accident at the age of eight left Walker blind and scarred in one eye. Later, when she was fourteen, she was partially improved in her eye but it left a profound influence on her. Walker graduated from high school as valedictorian of her class. In 1961, she entered [Spelman College](#) on a [Georgia](#) rehabilitation scholarship. After two years stay at Spelman and while she was a student at Sarah Lawrence College (1963–1965). She visited [Africa](#) in summer. There she fell in love with Trauman Held and wrote several poems that were later included in her first book of poetry called *Once* (1968). Upon her return to [Sarah Lawrence](#), Walker was pregnant and her desperate conditions nearly led her to commit suicide. She felt trapped by her body and believed that only an abortion could free her. The poems of love, suicide, and civil rights published in *Once* were written during her second period of self-imposed isolation. After a serious contemplation of her options, Walker aborted her pregnancy and published her first short story, “To Hell with Dying.” in 1967. Next the story of an old man who is recharged from death by the attentive love of two children was published as a children's book (in 1988) with illustrations by Catherine Deeter.

Walker's novel is related to social conditions that affect family relationships, in addition to her recurring theme of the suffering of black women at the hands of men. However, Walker is often faulted for her portrayal of black men as violent, an aspect which is frequently criticized in her work.

II. Walker as a Novelist

Though Alice Walker has worked in a variety of genres, including children's literature, poetry, nonfiction, and screenwriting, she is best known for her novels, which give voice to the concerns of an often doubly oppressed group, African American women. Walker returned to the South after college and worked as a voter register in Georgia and an instructor in black history in Mississippi. She was inspired by Martin Luther King Jr.'s message. She is best known for her Pulitzer Prize winning novel *The Color Purple*, which extends and solidifies many of the themes she first touched upon in her early work, which includes *Meridian*. Walker posits *Meridian's* struggle for personal transformation as an alternative to the political movements of the 1960s, particularly those that merely reproduced existing power structures. In this regard Karen Stein writes:

The novel points out that the Civil Rights Movement often reflected the oppressiveness of patriarchal capitalism. Activists merely turned political rhetoric to their own ends while continuing to repress spontaneous individuality. To overcome this destructiveness, Walker reaches for a new definition of revolution. Her hope for a just society inheres not merely in political change, but in personal transformation.

(130)

Walker's works are known for their portrayals of the African-American women's life. She depicts vividly the sexism, racism and poverty that make the life often a struggle. But she also portrays the strength of family, community, self-worth, and spirituality. A theme embedded in her works is the presentation of black culture. Her women characters forge important links to maintain continuity in both personal relationship and communities. Her work is an exploration of the individual identity of black women and how embracing their identity and bonding with other women affects the health of her community in a large scale Walker describes this kinship among women as "womanism" as opposed to feminism. Walker focuses on life being saved through change and redemption. The redemptive quality in Walker's works goes beyond the thematic to the very heart of her aesthetics. Even when she writes passionately about problems that ravage the land and the lives of people. Alice Walker emphasizes the healing power of love and the possibility of change. Change, that is personal and change in society.

A tireless crusader on behalf of women, Walker in her later career defends her work against censorship and continues to speak out against the horrors of domestic violence, sexual abuse, and genital mutilation, a ritualistic practice employed by several native African cultures. Not precisely aligned with broad feminist concerns, Walker has often labeled herself a "womanist," establishing her primary goal as a writer and individual to free women from oppression in all of its forms.

Walker is also a student of history, and she strives to create a dialogue in her work between the past and the present in an attempt to elucidate eternal truths as well as eternal struggles and hardships. Walker has an abiding love of and respect for Native Americans and sees their plight as instructive and an important correlative to

the black experience in the United States throughout the centuries. Talking on the issue of patriarchal domination in *Meridian*, Lynn Pifer mentions in her writing:

In *Meridian*, Meridian Hill has been conditioned by her community's patriarchal institutions to repress her individuality and, above all, not to speak out inappropriately. But when she finds that she cannot conform to authorized notions of appropriate speech, her only rebellious recourse is silence. Because of her refusal to participate in authorized discourse, Meridian fails to fit in with a succession of social groups- from her church congregation, to those at the elite college she attends, to a cadre of would-be violent revolutionaries. (76)

A theme throughout Walker's work is the preservation of black culture, and her women characters forge important links to maintain continuity in both personal relationships and communities. Walker admires the struggle of black women throughout history to maintain an essential spirituality and creativity in their lives, and their achievements serve as an inspiration to others. Walker's women characters like Meridian and Celie display strength, endurance, and resourcefulness in confronting and overcoming oppression in their lives. Walker is frank in depicting the often devastating circumstances of the twin afflictions of racism and sexism.

III. Walker's Major Works

The Color Purple and *Meridian* are the famous books written by Walker. When *The Color Purple* came out in 1982, Walker became known to an even wider audience. Her Pulitzer Prize and the movie by Steven Spielberg brought both fame and controversy. She was widely criticized for negative portrayals of men in *The*

Color Purple, though many critics admitted that the movie presented more simplistic negative pictures than the book's more nuanced portrayals.

Meridian was published in 1976 and brought Walker success and recognition as an important Black American Writer. This novel is the struggle of a black woman, living within the frame of patriarchy. It also deals with issues relating to racism and sexism and other possible forms of oppression. The novel chronicles the personal evolution of Meridian Hill, a young black woman during the Civil Rights Movement.

Walker's second novel, *Meridian*, explores one black woman's experience in the Civil Rights movement, the psychological makeup of which fascinates Walker more than the political and historical impact it had. Structurally complex, the novel raises questions of motherhood for the politically-aware female, and the implications for the individual of being committed to revolution. Barbara Christian writes that the main struggle in *Meridian* is the fight between a natural, life-driven spirit and society's deadly strictures as:

The concept of One Life motivates Meridian in her quest toward physical and spiritual health, the societal evils that subordinate one class to another, one race to another, one sex to another, fragment and ultimately threaten life. The novel *Meridian* is built on the tension between the African concept of animism, that spirit that inhabits all life, and the societal forces that inhibit the growth of the living toward their natural state of freedom. (91)

Meridian expresses a sharp critical sense as she deals with the issues of tactics and strategy in the Civil Rights Movement. She deals with the nature of commitment, the possibility of interracial love and communication, the vital and lethal strands in

American and black experiences, with violence and nonviolence. Walker explored a woman's successful effort to find her place in the Civil Rights Movement in *Meridian*.

Working in a campaign to register African American voters, Meridian cares broadly and deeply for the people she visits, and, while her coworkers quit and move to comfortable homes, she continues to work in the deep South despite a paralyzing illness. Meridian's nonviolent methods, though seemingly less radical than the methods of others, prove to be an effective means of furthering her beliefs.

Meridian has a positive sense of herself as a black woman. She is strong, independent, adventurous, the black daughter of Harriet Tubman. At the end of novel Meridian is successful in creating a new world where male and female equally participates. The whites no longer dominate blacks and human sexuality becomes a matter of choice. Meridian through her different actions such as rejecting to conceive black baby, involving herself in the Civil Rights Movement, divorcing with her previous husband, wants to break hierarchical structure and discovers a new world, a world in which she is a liberated being, is free to live freely.

In many ways, *Meridian* anticipates and paves the way for Walker's future preoccupations. It focuses on women's lives and examines how the past and the present interconnect and construct the future. *Meridian*, Walker's second work of long fiction, is set against the turbulent backdrop of the civil rights movement, which gained force in the 1960s, triggering sit-ins, demonstrations, and protests against the racist and segregationist policies that controlled and shaped the lives of African Americans in the South. Donna Krolik Hollenberg talks about the cross-racial relationships in *Meridian* and adds:

Although its primary subject is the legacy of black women in sexist, racist America, the novel also tests the limits of cross-racial relationships between two minority groups, Blacks and Jews. It depicts the multi-faceted politics of race and gender, raising questions about the interaction of racism and anti-Semitism in the shaping of identity. If one is willing to tolerate discomfort, forthright discussion of these themes offers an excellent learning opportunity, particularly in a multi-ethnic society. (33)

Walker's various aesthetic and social concerns are harmoniously combined in *Meridian*, an exploration of a young woman's coming of age and her journey from loneliness, guilt, and self-doubt, to self-acceptance, empowerment, and love. Like Walker once was, Meridian is set on a path to greater self-realization and endures the hardships of firmly and irrevocably establishing her identity amid the chaos of social upheaval, sexual alienation, and people who are not always approving or supportive of either the woman or the cause.

IV. Background of *Meridian*

Meridian is in some respects autobiographical, but Walker and Meridian Hill, the novel's protagonist, differ in many significant ways. Both Walker and Meridian were raised in rural Georgia and became pregnant as young students, though Walker, unlike Meridian, did not have the child. While Meridian's relationship with her mother was fraught with problems, Walker blossomed under the influence of her mother, Minnie. Minnie bought the young Walker three pivotal and symbolic gifts. A sewing machine to encourage self-sufficiency, a suitcase to nudge her curious and errant spirit, and a typewriter to nurture the gifted wordsmith and budding writer in

her daughter. Martha J. McGowan discusses the need to search deeply for Meridian's suffering and remarks:

Alice Walker's novel *Meridian* expressed a need to consider moral and philosophical issues raised by a political awakening. Shift from a preoccupation with commemorating black women's suffering to a concern with probing an individual black woman's situation for its roots and possibilities. Questions of responsibility among those with valid historic claims to having been victimized. (29)

Written against the backdrop of the Civil Rights Movement, Walker's *Meridian* explores African American women's identity vis-a-vis the political resistance of Euro-centric mainstream American cultural domination. The novel is about the personal struggle to overcome the patriarchal society. We can see a complete transformation of Meridian from a poor, uneducated black girl to an independent woman having her own identity.

Meridian gains agency and African American cultural identity that enables her to resist the white American cultural domination as well as African patriarchy. The emergence of an emboldened woman, who speaks her own language, follows her own God and joins in Civil Rights Movement to make black revolutionaries, is itself a great question mark to the patriarchal society and this is the appropriate critical focal point of this study. Thus, the novel is a subtle representation of a tormented, subordinated, dominated and self conflicting woman's psychology and frustration, isolation and rebellion that culminate in terrible action like revolt or death. It demonstrates a woman's self realization and establishment of self-identity.

In this thesis, the novel will be textually analyzed and attempts will be made to explore underlying issues as the focus of the novel which threatened Walker's literary reputation. The protagonist Meridian's struggle for identity will be analyzed in detail

and research will focus on the issue related to how the protagonist challenges a psychological, social and intellectual war against the patriarchal system and tries to overcome from familial, marital, social and cultural relationship to demonstrate her quest for identity.

Chapter Two

An Approach to Feminism

I. A Glimpse to Feminism

Feminism is an intellectual, philosophical and political [discourse](#) aimed at equal rights and legal protection for women. It involves various movements, [theories](#), and [philosophies](#), all concerned with issues of [gender difference](#), that advocate [equality](#) for women and that campaign for [women's rights](#) and interests. [Feminist theory](#) emerged from these feminist movements.

By general definition, feminism is a philosophy in which women and their contributions are valued. It is based on social, political and economical equality for women. Feminists can be anyone in the population, men, women, girl or boys. Feminism can also be described as a movement. It is a revolution that includes women and men who wish the world to be equal without boundaries. Feminists view the world as being unequal. They wish to see the gender gap and the idea that men are superior to women decreased or even abolished.

Feminism does not have a single fundamental definition. Feminism refers to the belief in the social, political, and economic equality of the sexes. The goal of feminist work is broader than simply a stronger emphasis on women. The goal is to revise our way of considering history, society, literature, so that both male and female are seen equally conditioned by the gender constructions of their culture. Feminists may differ in the importance they assign to sex, which is a biologically based category, but the idea that gender norms can be changed is central to feminist theory. The term feminism refers to a belief system rather than traits that have been labeled as feminine.

II. Feminist Upsurge and Feminism

Black women faced the same struggles as white women. However, they had to face issues of diversity on top of inequality. Black feminist organizations emerged during the 1970s and face many difficulties from both the culture they were confronting and their adjustment to their vulnerability within it. These women also fought against suppression from the larger movements in which many of its members came from.

Black feminist organizations had to overcome three different challenges that no other feminist organization had to face. The first challenge these women faced was to prove to other black women that feminism was not only for white women. They also had to demand that white women share power with them and affirm diversity and fight the misogynist tendencies of Black Nationalism.

Black feminism argues that [sexism](#), class oppression, and [racism](#) are inextricably bound together. Forms of feminism that strive to overcome sexism and [class](#) oppression but ignore race can discriminate against many people, including women, through racial bias. The liberation of black women entails freedom for all people, since it would require the end of racism, sexism, and class oppression. One of the theories that evolved out of this movement was [Alice Walker's Womanism](#).

Black feminists contend that the liberation of black women entails [freedom](#) for all people, since it would require the end of racism, sexism, and class oppression. There is a long-standing and important alliance between [postcolonial feminists](#), which overlaps with [transnational feminism](#) and [third-world feminism](#), and black feminists. Both have struggled for recognition, not only from men in their own culture, but also from Western feminists.

White women who dominate feminist discourse, who for the most part make and articulate feminist theory, have little or no understanding of white supremacy as a racial politic, of the psychological impact of class, of their political status within a racist, sexist, capitalist state. Many see feminism as operating exclusively within the terms white and American and perceive its opposite as being black and American. When given these two narrow and false choices, black women routinely choose race and let the lesser question of gender go. In this situation, those black women who identify with feminism must be recoded as being either non-black or less authentically black.

Globally, a white feminist agenda encompasses several major areas. First and foremost, the economic status of women and issues associated with women's global poverty, such as educational opportunities, industrial development, environmental racism, employment policies, prostitution, and inheritance laws concerning property, constitute a fundamental global women's issue.

Political rights for women, such as gaining the vote, rights of assembly, traveling in public, office holding, the rights of political prisoners, and basic human rights violations against women such as rape and torture constitute a second area of concern. A third area of global concern consists of marital and family issues such as marriage and divorce laws, child custody policies, and domestic labor. Women's health and survival issues, such as reproductive rights, pregnancy, sexuality, and AIDS constitute another area of global feminist concern. This broad global feminist agenda finds varying expressions in different regions of the world and among diverse populations.

In the context of feminism as a global political movement for women's rights and emancipation, the patterns of feminist knowledge and politics that African

American women encounter in the United States represent but a narrow segment refracted through the dichotomous racial politics of white supremacy in the United States. Because the media in the United States portrays feminism as a for-whites-only movement, and because many white women have accepted this view of American apartheid that leads to segregated institutions of all types, including feminist organizations, feminism is often viewed by both black and whites as the cultural property of white women.

III. Feminism and Awakening of Black Feminism

Feminism is political in nature. It concerns itself with the marginalization of all women. Feminists disagree with the inferior role inflicted upon them the patriarchal culture. They talk about how to unmask the culture and challenge it through literary texts. Feminist criticism includes a great variety of practices.

English feminist criticism is oriented to textual interpretation. It stresses on repression. American feminist criticism is essentially textual and its focus is on expression. Nevertheless, nearly all feminist start from one fundamental perception that is, recognition of the patriarchal structure of society, that the world is organized by men for the advantage of men, feminists examine the experience of diversities life of women from all races and classes and cultures.

Feminism emerged in the late 1960s, is a theoretical discourse advocating women's rights based on belief in the equality of the sexes. It is a doctrine that refuses to accept the cult of masculine chauvinism and superiority that considers women to a sex object, a second sex, second class human being and submissive other by redefining women's activities and goals from a women centered point of view. This movement is committed to the struggle against patriarchy and sexism. The growing

feminist movement sought not only to change society's prevailing stereotypes of women as relatively weak passive, docile and dependent individual but also to eliminate the subordination, oppression, inequalities and injustices women suffer because of their sex.

Black feminist thought demonstrates black women's emerging power as agents of knowledge. By portraying African-American women as self-defined, self-reliant individuals confronting race, gender, and class oppression, Afrocentric feminist thought speaks to the importance that oppression. Afrocentric feminist thought speaks to the importance that knowledge plays in empowering oppressed people. One distinguishing feature of black feminist thought is its insistence that both the changed consciousness of individuals and the social transformation of political and economic institutions constitute essential ingredients for social change.

Black feminism argues that [sexism](#), class oppression, and [racism](#) are inextricably bound together. Forms of feminism that strive to overcome sexism and [class](#) oppression but ignore race can discriminate against many people, including women, through racial bias. The liberation of black women entails freedom for all people, since it would require the end of racism, sexism, and class oppression. Black feminists point out that black woman experienced a different and more intense kind of oppression from that of white women. Black feminism after earlier movements led by white middle-class women whom they regard as having largely ignored oppression based on race and class. [Patricia Hill-Collins](#) defined Black feminism, in *Black Feminist Thought* (1991), as including, "women who theorize the experiences and ideas shared by ordinary black women that provide a unique angle of vision on self, community, and society" (55).

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Black Feminism is a political and social movement that grew out of black women's feelings of discontent with both the [Civil Rights Movement](#) and the [Feminist Movement](#) of the 1960s and 1970s. One of the foundation texts of Black Feminism is *An Argument for Black Women's Liberation as a Revolutionary Force*, authored by [Mary Ann Weathers](#) and published in 1969. Weathers states her belief that, "Women's Liberation should be considered as a strategy for an eventual tie-up with the entire revolutionary movement consisting of women, men, and children" (8). Not only did the Civil Rights Movement primarily focus only on the oppression of black men, but many black women faced severe sexism within Civil Rights groups. The Feminist Movement focused on the problems faced by white women. For instance, earning the power to work outside of the home was not an accomplishment for black feminists; they had been working all along. Neither movement confronted the issues that concerned black women specifically. Because of their [intersectional position](#), black women were being systematically ignored by both movements.

Black women began creating theory and developing a new movement which spoke of the combination of problems they were battling, including sexism, racism, and classism. While Afro-American women were suffering from [compulsory sterilization](#) programs, white women were subjected to multiple unwilled pregnancies and had to clandestinely [abort](#).

The Black Feminist Movement grew out of, and in response to, the Black Liberation Movement and the Women's Movement. While the explanations above do a decent job of explaining the Black Feminist Movement, there are certain ideas that are not addressed that play a major role in Black Feminism. When compared to the White Feminist, Black Feminist does not face the threat of being undermined by their own people. No one better exemplifies this ideal better than Michelle Wallace who was a noted Black Feminist and states:

We exist as women who are Black, who are feminists, each stranded for the moment, working independently because there is not yet an environment in this society remotely congenial to our struggle, because, being on the bottom, we would have to do what no one else has done: we would have to fight the world. (17)

The Black Feminist movement had to contend to Civil Rights movements that wanted women in a lesser role. Men believed the Black Women would organize around their own needs and minimize their own efforts, losing reliable allies in the struggle for civil rights. This movement not only had to contend with racial prejudice but also the structure of the patriarchal society making their struggle that much harder. All too often, "black" was equated with black men and "women" was equated with white women.

As a result, black 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 inter connected in their lives and to take action to stop racist, sexist, and classist discrimination. Black women were often discriminated against sexually and racially.

Although neither all the black men nor all the white women in their respective movements were sexist and racist, enough of those with powerful influence were able to make the lives of the black women in these groups almost unbearable. The movements were unable to meet the needs of black women and prompted the formation of the Black Feminist Movement.

The movement, though ostensibly for the liberation of the black race, was in word and deed for the liberation of the black male. Race was extremely sexualized in the rhetoric of the movement. Freedom was equated with manhood and the freedom of blacks with the redemption of black masculinity.

Many black men in the movement were interested in controlling black women's sexuality. Bell Hooks comments that during the Black Liberation Movement of the 1960s, "black men overemphasized white male sexual exploitation of black womanhood as a way to explain their disapproval of inter-racial relationships" (32).

It was, however, no contradiction of their political views to have inter-racial relationships themselves. Again, part of "freedom" and "manhood" was the right of men to have indiscriminate access to and control over any woman's body. Sexual discrimination against women in the Black Liberation Movement not only took the form of misogynist writings, it was also a part of daily life.

It must be stressed that it was not only many of the men but also a great number of the women in the Black Liberation Movements who were enforcing strict gender roles on black women. In the same way that women in dominant society do not resist but encourage sexism, black women fell prey to perpetuating patriarchy within the black community.

Part of the overwhelming frustration black women felt within the Women's Movement was at white feminists' unwillingness to admit to their racism. This unwillingness comes from the sentiment that those who are oppressed cannot oppress others. White women, who were without question sexually oppressed by white men, believed that because of this oppression they were unable to assume the dominant role in the perpetuation of white racism. However, they have absorbed supported and advocated racist ideology and have acted individually as racist oppressors.

Faced with the sexism of black men and the racism of white women, black women in their respective movements had two choices. They could remain in the movements and try to educate non-black or non-female comrades about their needs, or they could form a movement of their own. The first alternative, though noble in its intent, was not a viable option. While it is true that black men needed to be educated about the effects of sexism and white women about the effects of racism on black women's lives, it was not solely the responsibility of black women to educate them for this. As Audre Lorde opines in her view:

Women of today are still being called upon to stretch across the gap of male ignorance and to educate men as to our existence and our needs. This is an old and primary tool of all oppressors to keep the oppressed occupied with the master's concerns. Now we hear it is the task of women of Color to educate white women-in the face of tremendous resistance-as to our existence, our differences, our relative roles in our joint survival. This is a diversion of energies and a tragic repetition of racist patriarchal thought. (43)

Black feminist writings were to focus on developing theory which would address the simultaneity of racism, sexism, heterosexism, and classism in their lives.

In addition, the audience of these writings was to be black women, rather than white feminists or black male activists. To continue to address the oppressor's needs would be a waste of valuable energy. Black women needed to develop a critical, feminist consciousness and begin a dialogue which directly addressed their experiences and connected them to a larger political system.

The effectiveness of the movement has not been uniform in the white feminist and black communities. Many white women in the feminist movement have acknowledged their racism and made attempts to address it in anti-racist training seminars. Feminist theory now includes an analysis of the way race, class, sexuality, as well as gender influence women's lives.

The women's studies departments of many prominent universities and colleges now have courses which focus on black women's writings and history, in the United States and in other countries. However, in the black community, the movement has not been as effective. The rhetoric of current black liberation movements still fails to adequately address issues which affect black women. Awareness of sexism has increased within the black academic community but the popular culture continues to be extremely sexist and misogynist.

IV. Identity and its Types

Identity is at the center of our life. It is, in effect, becoming the price of entry in all manners of civil society. There is a great truth underlying the theory that people form identities for themselves, which may far outstrip their true status and accomplishments. But having formed such an identity, a person will try to live up to it or risk losing his own respect. A powerful identity becomes at once a restraint against actions that conflict with it, and a standard to which the person can aspire.

In most social situations, our name establishes our identity. A name establishes identity and creates a feeling of trust, even if it's a bit forced at times. A unique person will have a unique identity in the sense of being an identifiable individual among billions of others. That identity will be created by an authority such as a government at birth and decommissioned by the same government at death. Every uniquely identified person will have the opportunity to create or accept a variety of credentials attesting to some attributes of that identity. Identity is not just a set of computerized data. It is something much deeper and personal. Our identity is about how we perceive ourselves in relation to our families, our society, our gender and our beliefs. It's also about how we perceive and value each other. Staffan Selander underlines the importance of learning in the formation of identity as:

It seems obvious that our current society is in a stage of change that requires a new understanding of knowledge, learning and identity formation. The new position and role of the learner underlines the productive and constructive aspect of learning to be aware of their identity and origin. (269)

Identity becomes important when it becomes a question. It often becomes a question when individuals and groups are mobile and able to change some of their identifying traits. When people come into frequent contact with others unlike themselves, they can both heighten and put in jeopardy their sense of distinctiveness. There are chances for members to affirm their own identities as well as for members to guess as to others' identities. The process of identity formation develops within a social unit. Any identification requires a distinction, just as any distinction necessitates some identification. This brings us to the dichotomy of the self/other. The self is identified in relation to its position vis-à-vis the other. In other words, all identities exist only with their otherness. Without the other, the self actually cannot

know either itself or the world because meaning is created in discourse where consciousness meets.

Identification is of an exclusionary nature for the non-identified. In other words, in the identification of a group of people as a civilization, this unit is externalized or disassociated from the values, myths, symbols, attitudes and mores of those (non-identified) with whom the unit does not identify. It is also argued that the existence or the perception of threats from the other inevitably strengthens the identity of the self. Yet, the formation of the self is inextricably intertwined with the formation of its others and a failure to regard the others in their own right must necessarily have repercussions for the formation of the self. Civilizations are forms of collective identity that exclude each other on the basis of their distinctiveness.

The identity gaining process is a multi-directional, dynamic and enduring formation. This leads us to the plurality of identity. In other words, a person living in a state, can possess different identities.

Identity has become the central area of concern in cultural studies during the 1990s. Identity is the process, how we describe ourselves, to each other. Culture creates enormous pressure for conformity today as it is often referred to the individual or group identity. Identity is the meaning or self-concept that one gives to oneself or the meaning in general that human beings give to them. In a paper relating to diasporic identity and transcultural literacy, Alex Kostogriz and Georgina Tsolidis say:

Transcultural literacy is inseparable from social and cultural practices of meaning and identity-making on the fault-line between various and often competing cultures. This model of transcultural literacy uses

theorizations of space to connect textual practices to the construction of hybrid identities. In so doing, it offers an alternative to models of literacy premised on liberal or neo-conservative understandings of cultural difference. (129)

In other words, it is the sum totality of values attached to individuals by an age and a community, in terms of their class, caste, group or culture and institution of any kind. Relating to this issue, Stuart Hall in his essay *Cultural Identity and Diaspora* finds at least two different ways of thinking about cultural identity such as:

The first position defines 'cultural identity' in terms of one shared culture, a sort of collective 'one' 'true' self, hiding inside many other, more superficial or artificially imposed selves; which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common. Cultural identity in the second sense is a matter of becoming as well as of being. It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, times, history and culture. (111-12)

Individuals create their own identity, but not under conditions of their own choosing. In fact, identities are often created in the crucible of colonialism, racial and sexual subordination, and national conflicts, but also in the specificity of group histories and structural position.

The problems involved in trying to live with multiple identities helps to generate endless discourses about the process of finding or constructing a coherent identity. Yet in contrast to those arguments which assume that the logic of modernity is to produce an increasingly narrow individualism, a narcissistic preoccupation with individual identity which was common in the 1970s. Today we find arguments which

emphasize the search for a strong collective identity, some new form of community, within modern societies.

Many theorists also agree that no less than four of the forms of identity so powerful today were invented as if from scratch in the modern period: race, arguably originating with Kant's anthropological writings and made possible by the developments in biological explanation; class, emerging as an objective social location only with the emergence of capitalism; nationality, produced along with the development of the nation-state ; and sexuality, which developed as an identity rather than a practice in the context of the creation of alternative communities in which individuals could develop whole ways of life in new and different forms.

Our identities are never discovered. They are always constituted, constructed, invented, imagined, imposed, projected, suffered, and celebrated. Identities are never univocal, stable, or innocent. They are always an accomplishment and a ceaseless project.

For this reason, in the process of constituting them and negotiating them, we discover that we have become or are now something that has little resemblance to what we thought we have become, and perhaps are reluctant to face, enters another factor: namely, how we get a glimpse or take a glance at that identity that was and that we have become. Identities have a lot to do with images, imaginaries, and the imagination.

There is considerable interest in the question of identity. It is equaled only by the considerable confusion around the question of why identities tend to exert such power. We also inquire whether they should be acknowledged and legally recognized or simply ignored in the hope that they will disappear. Everyone seems to agree that

social identities such as ethnicity, sexuality, and nationality have come to the center of political mobilization since the United States' revolution of the 1960s. Ethnic identity recognizes that a person belongs to a particular group that shares not only ethnicity but common cultural practices. In his article *New Ethnicities*, Stuart Hall puts forth ethnic identities:

We are all, ethnically located and our ethnic identities are crucial to our subjective sense of who we are. But this is also a recognition that this is not an ethnicity which is doomed to survive, only by marginalizing, dispossessing, displacing and forgetting other ethnicities. This precisely is the politics of ethnicity predicted on difference and diversity. (94)

But the social meanings attached to such things as skin color and body shape, the hierarchies of language and differential roles in reproduction, and the very significance accorded various identity markers, are firmly in place when a given individual is born, circumscribing their flexibility and invoking a constellation of meanings that will come into play by their appearance, or their birth certificate. To understand identities then, we need to study psychology, culture, politics, and economics, as well as philosophy and history.

Identities need to be analyzed not only in their cultural location but also in relation to historical epoch. The constellation of practices, beliefs about identity, and the lived experiences associated with various identities, and the legal or formal recognitions of identity not only undergo constant change but can produce truly new forms of identity. Identities are the product of discourses that regulate the individual's worldly perception. They are not things which exist simply there with universal qualities, rather they are discursive constructions. Thus, in this sense, identities are

constituted or made. Identity is never a peaceful acquisition. It is claimed as a guarantee against a threat of annihilation that can be figured by another identity or by erasing of identities. Identity therefore can be defined as a set of behavioral or personal characteristics by which an individual is recognizable as a member of a group.

a. Personal Identity

Personal identity deals with questions about us. Many of these questions are familiar ones that occur to everyone at some time. Who am I? When did I begin? What will happen to me when I die? Discussions of personal identity go right back to the origins of Western philosophy. Our identity in this sense consists roughly of those properties that make you unique as an individual and different from others. It is the way we see or define our self. It may also be the network of values and convictions that structure our life. We might call it our individual psychological identity. Our individual psychological identity is a property and presumably one that we have only contingently. We might have had a different identity from the one we in fact have. Likewise, it is a property that we might have for a while and then lose. We could acquire a new individual identity, or perhaps even carry on without one.

b. National and Cultural Identity

A national identity provides us with a specific moral agenda. National identity, it is often used as an argument for the existence of special obligations. National identity has served as a reason to ignore morally more urgent demands outside the borders of one's own nation. Part of the secret of national identity lies in the emergence of vernacular print languages, their spread through large numbers of the population, and their coming to play a privileged role in public and private life. As

these languages formed the identities of those who lived in a particular region, they provided the foundation for a shared sense of belonging to the same community. The language and cultural symbols through which we now understand who we are may be relatively recent phenomena, but for most of us they have come to provide and inescapable structure of experience.

A major source of the strength of national identity has been in its inescapability. For much of the modern world, the nation has appropriated to itself the linguistic and cultural means necessary for the articulation of the sense of self of its members. The fusion of language, cultural means necessary for the articulation of the sense of self of its members. The fusion of language, culture and policy defined by the nation has so entered our conception of ourselves that it becomes difficult to address the question of who we are except in terms which presuppose that we already have national identity. As we come to have a sense of who we were, we form a conception of ourselves and belonging to a particular nation.

Cultural identity does not always take the form of national identity. Social identity is how we function within many different social situations and relate to a range of other people. Social groups may involve family, ethnic communities, cultural connections, nationality, friends and work. They are an important and valued part of our daily life. How we see ourselves in relation to our social groupings defines our social identity. Placing the issue of identity in a socio-historical location, Linda Martin Alcoff says:

Identities need to be analyzed not only in their cultural location but also in relation to historical epoch. The constellation of practices, beliefs about identity, the lived experiences associated with various

identities, and legal or formal recognitions of identity not only undergo constant change but can produce truly new forms of identity. (3)

Several closely related practical and theoretical questions concerning identity emerge from current debates about cultural diversity. If multiculturalism is to be a goal for educational and political institutions, we need a workable notion of how a social group is unified by a common culture, as well as the ability to identify genuine cultural differences across groups. The most basic questions about identity call for a more general reexamination of the relation between personal experience and public meanings- subjective choices and evaluation, on the one hand, and objective social location, on the other.

c. Global Identity

In a world of many despondent people, dependently performing dull work, deep seated needs of security and belongings were stirred and conveyed by two words that had quite a large appeal and still evoke positive feelings. These words are roots and identity. Our national identity was not chosen but determined by the contingencies of birth and upbringing. It is this very contingency that makes this identity seem morally suspect.

With reference to human beings, roots basically means to have a firm ground (physical, cultural) to which one is firmly anchored. In contrast, to have no roots, to be 'déraciné,' is considered an unfortunate situation, like floating aimlessly in the air, in a state of psychological malaise and uneasiness. To have no roots is believed also similar to having no identity, to be a phantom with no face, no legible past and no foreseeable future. In fact, having an identity has now become like a byword for

existing. All this seems quite unobjectionable. A more careful and critical examination of these two terms brings to the fore less appealing aspects.

In order to firmly root and control somebody, the state needed to clearly identify him/her, and so identity cards and all sorts of documents and papers were invented to register each and every person subjected to a central state power. In some countries (Italy), everybody has to carry an identity document at all times, otherwise they might be stopped and detained by the state police. To have no identity (stateless person) or many identities (cosmopolitan person) or an identity that does not match with the (national) one imposed or accepted by the state, is a sure recipe for trouble especially in times of insecurity and nationalistic frenzy. Identity is also forced upon individuals by a system of cultural indoctrination, when the ruling clique dictates on everybody the acceptance of the same language and laws. As a matter of fact, the national identity is essentially a manufactured identity, obtained by crushing local cultures, rather than a real common bond joining people living next to each other.

A good number of recent studies illustrate how cultural identities, as other social representations, are socially produced and not passively inherited legacies. Representations of identities are continuously produced by individual and collective social actors who constitute and transform themselves through both these very symbolic practices, and their relations (alliance, competition, struggle, negotiation, etc.) with other social actors. In the present age of globalization there are practically no fully isolated social units. Although some exceptions may exist, most social aggregates, or at least some social actors within them, are in one way or another internationally and/or transnational linked. According to the scope of their practices social actors may be classified in local, regional, national international, transnational and global.

Chapter Three

Exploration of African American Identity

Meridian is set in the Southern United States during the 1960s and the early 70s. The heroine, Meridian, is a black woman from a southern town. She marries, has a child, gets a divorce, sends her child away, and continues working in a voters' registration campaign, encouraging African-Americans to register. Meridian is different from her co-workers. She interacts with people as individuals, rather than by stereotyping them. For example, while others talk black families about the importance of voting, Meridian sits and talks with them, trying to address their basic needs of food, heat, and affection.

The novel takes a complicated look at black-white and black-black relations. It seems inadequate in this novel either to see people solely in terms of race or solely in terms of individual personalities. A large section of the novel deals with a marriage between a white woman and a black man. Walker seems to support an ethics based on personal interaction more than on universal rules.

Meridian is a passionate, touching book. It depicts the minds and hearts of blacks living in the South in the 1960s. Meridian Hill is a young black woman, who is slightly crazy, yet completely involving and entertaining. Meridian is very different from other people. She feels things more acutely, sensitively, and strongly than other people. Her emotions, anger, hate, pain, suffering, are all depicted with startling clarity. Meridian, who is a civil rights worker, is deeply afraid that her people, and race, will dehumanize themselves and lose their souls.

Meridian is plagued by a mysterious inherited illness, much like epilepsy, which parallels and triggers her spiritual and physical transformation. The sickness

renders her unconscious, episodes she refers to as “falling down,” and it subjects her to paralysis, blindness, and hair loss. On one hand, the condition connects her directly with her father and great-grandmother, who suffered the same burden. The illness is also the physical rendering of Meridian’s deep emotional and spiritual angst, the grief and sadness that have marked and gripped her throughout her life. The illness becomes a means for Meridian to suffer, to perform penance for this ambiguous wrong she felt she has done. It also offers her atonement and, ultimately, self-acceptance. When she is well again, rising out of her sick bed and heading full force into the future, she can finally forgive herself and love and accept herself for who she is.

This book focuses more on characterization than plot. The events seem to be less important than the feelings, thoughts and passions of Meridian, Lynne, and Truman. Meridian's story is her struggle into adulthood, to self-awareness, public-awareness, and ultimately her struggles for civil rights. Events are strung over 25 years, although most events occur in the height of the Civil Rights Movement. Meridian feels that she will always stand up in the movement, since she is determined to resist the patriarchal and racial domination against people like her. She feels that the movement will provide a platform to raise her voice against oppression and therefore she will be able to search for her identity.

I. Theme of *Meridian*

Some events of the story are revealed in a non-chronological way. Themes run through that tie all the threads together. Losing children, inter-racial struggles both in friendship and marriage and outside of it, the tensions between love and friendship, violence and peace and of course the very human struggle for human rights are the prominent themes.

That theme is played out in the story of a child of 13 who bears a baby and kills it, after she has bitten its cheek like an apple, and is put in prison, Lynne, whose daughter Camara is raped and murdered, loses her child and almost her reason. One of Meridian's acts on behalf of the black community in a small town in Alabama is to force the end of the flooding that menaces the children. The city has closed the swimming pools sooner than integrate them. In the hot weather, black children wade in the ditches behind their houses, where the city without warning flushes the reservoir of excess water.

"It was Meridian who had led them to the mayor's office, bearing in her arms the bloated figure of a five-year-old boy who had been stuck in the sewer for two days before he was raked out with a grappling hook. To the people who followed Meridian it was as if she carried a large bouquet of long-stemmed roses. The body might have smelled just that sweet, from the serene, set expression on her face. They had followed her into a town meeting over which the white-haired, bespectacled mayor presided, and she had placed the child, whose body was beginning to decompose, beside his gavel."

Walker consciously rejects death. Meridian's political commitment is not to end in martyrdom: there have been too many martyrs to her cause. Still, we need some other equivalent of death or marriage to round off a tale, and Walker has not found one here. We are told that Meridian has brought off a successful change from victim to fully responsible protagonist: that she no longer need punish herself physically, have fits, go blind because she acts for her people and herself, and that she believes she could kill if she must to prevent more martyrdom. But telling is not enough. She has ceased to be one sort of committed person and become another.

Some act is needed to make real the change and it isn't there; but that's a minor failure in a tight, fascinating novel.

Though Alice Walker has worked in a variety of genres, including children's literature, poetry, nonfiction, and screenwriting, she is best known for her novels, which give voice to the concerns of an often doubly oppressed group: African American women. She is best known for her Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Color Purple*, which extends and solidifies many of the themes she first touched upon in her early work, which includes *Meridian*. In many ways, *Meridian* anticipates and paves the way for Walker's future preoccupations: it focuses on women's lives and examines how the past and the present interconnect and construct the future. *Meridian*, Walker's second work of long fiction, is set against the turbulent backdrop of the civil rights movement, which gained force in the 1960s, triggering sit-ins, demonstrations, and protests against the racist and segregationist policies that controlled and shaped the lives of African Americans in the South.

As years pass, her co-workers quit and move into comfortable houses. She moves deeper south, living in whatever housing the community can afford to give in exchange for her constant work on their behalf. Due to her dedication to the movement, frequently, after staging a rally or other events, Meridian develops partial paralysis. She grows more and more ill. A halo-like light surrounds her head as she thinks of the history of her people and of her role in that history. There is a tremendous change in her outlook. She starts with zeal and new insight to bring about change within the oppressed black people. She ultimately heals herself and moves to the next small town. Later in the village of Chicokema, Meridian becomes ill but is at ease with poor people around her as:

There were periods in Meridian's life when it could not be perceived that she was ill. It was true that she'd lost so much of her hair that finally she had shaved her head and begun wearing a striped white and black railroad worker's cap. And it was also true that was frail and sickly- looking. But among the impoverished badly nourished black villagers– who attempted to thrive on a diet of salt meat and potatoes during the winter, and fresh vegetables without meat during the summer – she did not look out of place. In fact, she looked as if she belonged. (145)

Walker prefaces her novel with a lengthy list of definitions and traditional usages of the word Meridian. This alone signifies the fact that Meridian resists easy definition or simple categorization. She is a complex and capacious character whose presence and identity cannot be reduced to a simple phrase or formulation. The term also sets up a comparison between Meridian and the growing Civil Rights Movement. One of the most common definitions of the term Meridian is zenith, the highest point of power, prosperity, and splendor.

Not only does the novel trace the rise and growing power of social activism, united in the face of racist and segregationist policies, but it also tracks the ascent of Meridian from her spiritual and physical pain to a newly whole being in full charge of her capacities and inner wealth. An alternate meaning, “distinctive character,” applies just as well to the novel’s protagonist and namesake. Describing Meridian’s outlook, Walker presents:

She wore a long Indian bedspread skirt – yellow, with brown and black elephants– and a loose black blouse embroidered with flowers and small mirrors around the neck. Intricately worked gold earrings

dangled against her neck. Her olive complexion, which tanned golden in a day of sun, was now chalk-white, her eyes were red-veined and her eyelids drooped. Her dark hair was tangled and dull. (147)

Meridian is energized by a younger generation coming into its full power and raising its voice in dissent against the institutional racism that prevailed through the 1960s. Through occasionally violent protests and demonstrations, *Meridian* and other activists attempt to institute change and alter perceptions. Idealistic as they are, they ultimately find various degrees of satisfaction with the goals and ideals of the civil rights movement. *Meridian* feels that she will always stand on the fringes of the movement since she is unprepared to take her dissent to a radical, if not murderous, level. Talking of the camaraderie among the young generation, *Meridian* notices that:

As they walked, people began to engage each other in loud, even ringing, conversation. They inquired about each other's jobs. They asked after members of each other's families. They conversed about the weather, and everywhere the call for Coca-Colas, for food, rang out. Popcorn appeared, and along their route hot-dog stands sprouted their broad. Multicolored umbrellas. (186)

Lynne feels she must go to greater lengths to establish herself within the black community as well as in the movement. However, her whiteness will always set her apart, and she remains an outsider, ultimately pushed to the fringes of the movement. Lynne struggles with adapting and applying her own idealism to meaningful change in the lives of southern blacks. Lynne uses the movement to transcend her sanitized upbringing, though her guilt at coming from a white, privileged background becomes all-consuming. Her idealism and personal agenda initially hinder her effectiveness as a civil rights worker. On a voter-registration drive, accompanied by *Meridian*, Lynne

comes into contact with a variety of impoverished, rural communities. When Lynne first appears in *Meridian*, she is an idealistic student who has arrived at Saxon College to take part in the allure of the burgeoning civil rights movement. She and the other northern transplants adopt a patronizing attitude toward the black women of Saxon, exoticizing and romanticizing their otherness.

Truman eventually sours to the movement, having lost sight of its intentions in his self-absorption. In the end, Meridian realizes the necessity of dying or killing for the movement, concluding that the battle is won in small ways, such as getting blacks registered to vote and improving the lives of people victimized by the unchecked expression of racism. Meridian feels and says, “For it is the song of the people, transformed by the experiences of each generation, that holds them together, and if any part of it is lost the people suffer and are without soul” (201).

In *Meridian*, young activists attempt to break with tradition by bringing an end to the racism and segregation that had overshadowed black Americans for centuries. Walker shifts her focus from the present to the past to explore the lives of people who helped pave the way to the present moment. Throughout *Meridian*, Walker stresses the universality of the human experience and suggests that no one has cornered the market on suffering. Rather, many individuals from a variety of groups and backgrounds share a common history of exploitation, guilt, suffering, violence, and, ultimately, freedom, triumph, and acceptance.

Walker wrote the novel at a time when many young blacks were leaning away from the tenets of nonviolence and civil disobedience that characterized the early years of the movement and took on more militant and extreme stances that alienated their supporters. Some literary critics believe that the novel is a critique of the path that the Civil Rights Movement went on, claiming that Walker felt that the revolution

never addressed the suffering of women and perpetuated destructive and often chauvinistic values. Many have also felt that Walker used *Meridian* to showcase her [womanist](#) (as opposed to feminist) attitudes. A strong believer in the inbred power of the woman, Walker depicts her title character as an innately tough, powerful person, though not one without problems as well. In fact, Walker argues that personal struggles are an unavoidable part of life and that it is the way that one overcomes their obstacles that defines their character. *Meridian* frequently turns to previous examples of strong female role models when in doubt about her own inner strength. A number of critics have attended to different aspects of Walker's novel. Donna Krolik Hollenberg writes about *Meridian* that it is:

The story of a young black women's struggle to find herself in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. Although its primary subject is the legacy of black women in sexist, racist America, the novel also tests the limits of cross racial relationships between two minority groups, Blacks and Jews. (31)

Lynn Pifer writes in *African-American Review* that he further sees *Meridian* as, "Full of victims of this tradition of Black Motherhood" (36). *Meridian* herself belongs to the worthless minority of mothers excluded by the tradition. Her own sacrifice of giving up her child is as painful and trying as any of the legendary sacrifices, but according to the code of the tradition, *Meridian*'s trying is not a sacrifice but a case of willful neglect. Another critic, Karen Stein writes on the ill effects of the Civil Rights Movement in *Meridian* as:

The novel points out that the Civil Rights Movement often reflected the oppressiveness of patriarchal capitalism. Activists merely turned political meteoric to their own ends while continuing to repress

spontaneous individuality. To overcome this destructiveness, Walker reaches for a new definition of revolution. Her hope for a just society inheres not merely in political change, but in political change, but in personal transformation. (130)

One of the major issues in the novel is the fact that black women are often seen as little more than baby-making machine and Meridian tries to break out of this stereotype by giving away her child and attending college. In this connection Barbara Christiana writes:

Since, in the principle, society places motherhood on a pedestal, while in reality it rejects individual mothers as human beings with needs and desires, mothers must both love their role as they are penalized for it. As they praised for being mothers, they are also damned as baby machines that spew out their product indiscriminately upon society. (425)

Though different critics have seen the novel from different points of view, my research will focus on researching

In *Meridian*, young activists attempt to break with tradition by bringing an end to the racism and segregation that had overshadowed black Americans for centuries. Walker shifts her focus from the present to the past to explore the lives of people who helped pave the way to the present moment. The experiences of Louvinie and Feather Mae, for example, frame the issues that Meridian and her father face. The serpent mound also evokes this powerful historical precedent, serving as a vital connection between Meridian, her father, and the ancestors who came before her. Throughout *Meridian*, Walker stresses the universality of the human experience and suggests that

no one has cornered the market on suffering. Rather, many individuals from a variety of groups and backgrounds share a common history of exploitation, guilt, suffering, violence, and, ultimately, freedom, triumph, and acceptance.

Walker prefaces her novel with a lengthy list of definitions and traditional usages of the word *meridian*. A total of twelve different meanings are included for both the word's noun and adjectival form. This alone signifies the fact that *Meridian* resists easy definition or simple categorization. She is a complex and capacious character whose presence and identity cannot be reduced to a simple phrase or formulation. The term also sets up a comparison between *Meridian* and the growing civil rights movement. One of the most common definitions of the term is "zenith, the highest point of power, prosperity, splendor." Not only does the novel trace the rise and growing power of social activism, united in the face of racist and segregationist policies, but it also tracks the ascent of *Meridian* from her spiritual and physical pain to a newly whole being in full charge of her capacities and inner wealth. An alternate meaning, "distinctive character," applies just as well to the novel's protagonist and namesake.

II. Transformation of *Meridian*

Meridian Hill is a young woman at an Atlanta college attempting to find her place in the revolution for racial and social equality. She discovers the limits beyond which she will not go for the cause, but despite her decision not to follow the path of some of her peers, she makes significant sacrifices in order to further her beliefs. *Meridian*, the main character, grows up through the eyes of the reader. Her journey to self-discovery is marked by physical and sexual abuse, a broken marriage, and a child she decides to give away. Her strange illness is in some ways a manifestation of her instability and insecurity. Her bouts of lost consciousness and episodes of paralysis

signal that she is a woman without an identity or a sustaining inner life. Ultimately, she realizes that her power lies in her unique and unwavering courage. In school, she is unable to finish a speech because she knows that there is no truth in the words she speaks as: Meridian was trying to explain to her mother that for the first time she really listened to what she was saying, knew she didn't believe it, and was so distracted by this revelation that she could not make the rest of her speech (43).

Ten years ago in New York City, [Meridian](#) was unwilling to assert that she would kill on behalf of a black revolutionary organization, to the dismay of the others assembled. Then, even further back in time, Meridian, at the age of thirteen, was unwilling to accept Jesus into her life, a decision that prompts her mother to withdraw her love. She, back in the present, has decided to return to her roots as a former civil rights worker, and vows to live and work amongst the people. As a teenager, uninformed about sex, Meridian becomes pregnant, marries, and drops out of school to have the baby boy, who makes her feel indifferent at best.

Around the time her marriage to [Eddie](#) was dissolving, Meridian notices the presence of white civil rights workers in a black neighborhood. Later, the house in which they are staying is bombed. The incident spurs Meridian to volunteer for the cause. At the headquarters, she meets Truman. Soon they are demonstrating together and getting beaten, arrested, and jailed. Meridian's mother disapproves of Meridian's radical political activities. Unexpectedly, Meridian is offered a scholarship to Saxon College. Her friends attempt to convince her mother that it is a great opportunity for Meridian. Giving up Eddie Jr., Meridian starts school but is plagued with the guilt that always dogs her, "yet she did not know of what she might be guilty" (49).

The fragile relationship that [Meridian](#) has with her mother casts a shadow over much of her life, and she struggles to overcome this and other obstacles as she

searches for self-awareness and self-acceptance. Her mother's emotional distance, disapproving nature, and moral superiority fill [Meridian](#) with guilt and sadness, which persist well into adulthood. Meridian longs for guidance and a sense of belonging. Ultimately, she struggles with her own sense of sacrifice and dedication to the cause.

She questions her own revolutionary impulses after admitting her inability to kill on behalf of the movement. Feeling a gulf in her life between the ideals of the other civil rights activists and the ways by which they actually go about implementing change, Meridian returns to her roots, working and living in often-impooverished and rural communities. Meridian selflessly helps others in order to compensate for the guidance which she never received from her mother. The work, coupled with her bravery and determination, result in the emergence of a calm, sustaining, and growing self-awareness. Describing her mother, Walker writes:

Her mother was not a woman who should have had children. She was capable of thought and growth and action only if unfettered by the needs of dependents, or the demands, requirements, of a husband. Her spirit was of such fragility that the slightest impact on it caused a shattering beyond restoration. (50)

At the beginning of the novel, she is a broken and damaged individual, mourning a love and loss which she cannot verbalize. At the end, she emerges whole and healthy, thanks to her struggles and the hard-won wisdom, she has acquired along the way. Meridian ultimately realizes that no single person, movement, or institution can offer her the assistance she seeks and she finally turns to herself. But her new understanding enables her to imagine a place for herself and her nonviolence in the future: Perhaps it will be her part to walk behind the real revolutionaries-those who know they must spill blood in order to help the poor and the black and when they stop

to wash off the blood and find their throats too choked with the smell of murdered flesh to sing. If she can only do that, my role will not have been a useless one after all.

Meridian also believes that she has failed traditional Black Motherhood. She knew that enslaved women had been made miserable by the sale of their children, which they 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. Meridian had given away her precious child. She thought of her mother as being worthy of this maternal history, and of herself as belonging to an unworthy minority, for which there was no precedent and of which she was, as far as she knew, the only member.

Her ability to see the connection of African American people to each other and to their collective past and to see herself as the preserver of that past and its spiritual values, like an African griot, frees Meridian from suffering. Though, once she felt burdened by the past, by her inability to live up to the example of her foremothers, Meridian feels strengthened by her connection to them. Working in a campaign to register African American voters, Meridian cares broadly and deeply for the people she visits. Her nonviolent methods, though seemingly less radical than the methods of others, prove to be an effective means of furthering her beliefs.

The early signs of resistance in Meridian are when she rejects religion at a very young age despite her mother's devout Christian beliefs. In the school, she is unable to finish a speech because she knows that there is no truth in the words she speaks. The following passage reveals the intellect that overpowers her emotion developing in Meridian. Alice Walker writes about her defiance as:

She had once attended an oratorical competition at her old high school, where Meridian was well on her way to distinguishing herself.

Meridian was reciting a speech that extolled the virtues of the Constitution and praised the superiority of The American Way of Life. The audience cared little for what she was saying, and of course they didn't believe any of it, but they were rapt, listening to her speak so passionately and with such sad valor in her eyes. (121)

Yet another example is how Meridian is able to be a nonconformist when she gives up family life and motherhood when she has the opportunity to attend college. Her feelings are well explained in this passage. "When she gave him away she did so with a light heart. She did not look back, believing she had saved a small person's life" (90-91). Although Meridian feels it will be best for the child as well as for herself, this decision causes great disturbance within her because of her mother's disapproval.

III. Meridian's Involvement in Civil Rights Movement

Meridian, is the personal evolution of a young black woman against the backdrop of the politics of the Civil Rights Movement. Structurally complex, the novel raises questions of motherhood for the politically-aware female, and the implications for the individual of being committed to revolution. *Meridian* deals with the relationship between Meridian Hill's struggle in the Civil Rights Movement, to change the conditions of black people's life, and her own development, as a repressed individual who is transformed through her personal struggle and the Civil Rights work. Meridian escapes her loveless marriage and the burden of child-rearing. She decides not to waste her life, as she feels her mother has, and devotes herself to a cause she finds meaningful, the Civil Rights Movement. Writing about Meridian's role in the movement, Roberta M. Hendrickson relates:

Meridian is more than a novel about the Civil Rights Movement, and critics have focused on many aspects of this complex work. *Meridian* is a novel of the Civil Rights Movement and Walker used her experience in the Movement and the experience of others of her generation to deal with the social, political and philosophical issues raised by the Movement, issues that continue to engage us today. Other critics have focused on the Civil Rights Movement in discussing *Meridian*, but they do not discuss the connection between Walker's experience in the Movement and the novel. (35)

As a black woman who grew up in the South and came of age in the 1960s in the Civil Rights Movement and was influenced by the Women's Movement that grew out of it, Alice Walker has uniquely placed *Meridian* to interpret the Civil Rights Movement and its aftermath in fiction. Because she writes from the perspective of the 1970s, when the Movement had long since been declared dead, she makes it possible for her readers to understand what was lost when the Civil Rights Movement ended. In remembering the dream, she reaffirms the Movement's vision of freedom, equality and nonviolence and its commitment to the black and poor. *Meridian* becomes a voice for Walker in the Movement and the experience of others, especially black women, to explore issues of gender as well as race. Walker questions *Meridian*'s quest to be a volunteer as, "what was she volunteering into? She had no real idea. Something about the bombing had attracted her, the obliteration of the house, the knowledge that had foreseen this destruction. What would these minds, these people, be like" (80).

Meridian explores the effects of the burden of history, of growing up in a racist society, on relationships between black women and men, black men and white women, and black women and white women in the Civil Rights Movement. Writing

Meridian allowed Walker to make her protagonist Meridian, accept her role as a black revolutionary artist, one who passes on the story of the Civil Rights Movement to future generations, teaching them their history, inspiring them to continue the struggle.

Alice Walker shows us the emotional, physical, and psychological stages of resistance that Meridian goes through during the height of the civil rights movement. Unsure of the existence of God and her own relationship to the spiritual world, Meridian finds that traditional paths and explanations do not comfort her. Instead, she turns to the Civil Rights Movement, which gains force and momentum during her young adult years. *Meridian*, explores one black woman's experience in the Civil Rights Movement and historical impact it had. *Meridian* exemplifies Walker's ability to combine the personal and the political in fiction. Applauding Meridian for her work Walker says:

The majority of black townspeople were sympathetic to the movement from the first, and told Meridian she was doing a good thing: typing. Teaching illiterates to read and write, demonstrating against segregated facilities and keeping the movement house open when the other workers returned to school. (85)

Meridian's reaction to Truman's interest in white women is like that of many young black women in the Civil Rights Movement. Many black women hated white women, because racism made white women the ideal of feminine beauty, and black women were made to feel that they had to straighten their hair and bleach their skin to be beautiful. *Meridian* deals with the issues of tactics and strategy in The Civil Rights Movement, with the nature of commitment, the possibility of interracial love and communication, the vital and lethal strands in American and black experience, with

violence and nonviolence. The Civil Rights Movement brought black and white young people together as equals, though they had been raised in a racist, segregated society. New possibilities for interracial friendship, love and conflict were created in life and in fiction.

Unlike many young black women in the Movement, Meridian is able to tell Lynne, “I tried very hard not to hate you. And I think I always succeeded” (175). It is possible for Meridian not to hate Lynne, because, through personal struggle and political involvement in the Civil Rights Movement, Meridian has created herself in the image of her black foremothers. She has a positive sense of herself as a black woman- strong, independent, adventurous, a daughter of Harriet Tubman. For Meridian, white women are bland and uninteresting, unworthy of envy.

Meridian's struggle is also personal and spiritual, a struggle with the ideal of nonviolence. Meridian raises a difficult question, both political and philosophical. The question of how to create a just and peaceful or nonviolent society from one that is both unjust and violent. This question was raised but left unanswered by the Civil Rights Movement. Meridian is divided against herself on the question of nonviolence. Meridian challenges the abandonment of nonviolence that followed the Civil Rights Movement. Though Meridian agrees with her friends that “nonviolence has failed” to free black people, she cannot, like them, proclaim herself ready to “kill for the Revolution” (31). Meridian is willing to die but does not think she can kill for the freedom of black people. She knows that it may be necessary to kill to free black people and poor people, but she cannot imagine a society created through violence in which people can be free and spiritually whole. Meridian expresses concern for the spiritual survival of her people. Meridian believes, with Martin Luther King, Jr., that in using violence, the people risk losing their soul.

Meridian realizes that she suffers because she cannot accept her inability to kill, because she thinks, “I am not to belong to the future” (201). But her new understanding enables her to imagine a place for herself and her nonviolence in the future:

Perhaps it will be my part to walk behind the real revolutionaries-those who know they must spill blood in order to help the poor and the black –and when they stop to wash off the blood and find their throats too choked with the smell of murdered flesh to sing, I will come forward and sing from memory songs they will need once more to hear. For it is the song of the people, transformed by the experience of each generation, that holds them together, and if any part of it is lost the people suffer and are without soul. If I can only do that, my role will not have been a useless one after all. (201)

Commemorating Martin Luther King Jr., Meridian tells Truman that revolution would not begin with an act of murder but with teaching. A revolution, devoid of educating the mind and the self, is narrowed down to the act of human destruction. Going to the South as a Civil Rights worker, Meridian visits the Black Church in Georgia, where she discerns the real function of the Church as the political and social center of the black people’s struggle, the only place left for black people to congregate, where the approach to the future was considered communally, and moral questions were taken seriously.

Meridian is a novel that affirms the Movement's vision of freedom and nonviolence. It affirms blackness and African American heritage in a racist society that failed to value and continued to destroy black lives. *Meridian* also focuses on black women and their participation in the Movement, refusing to make them less

than they had been. Meridian combines the black consciousness and feminist consciousness that grew out of the Civil Rights Movement. She is equally determined to free black people, but she must continue the struggle alone, after the Movement has been declared dead. Meridian refuses martyrdom and chooses to live when she is able to see her connection to her people:

She understood, finally, that the respect she owed her life was to continue to live it, and not to give up any particle of it, without a fight to the death, preferably not her own. And that this existence extended beyond herself to those around her because the years in America had created them one Life. (200)

Unable to kill, Meridian offers herself as a martyr for her people's freedom. Shortly after each march that she leads, Meridian loses consciousness and becomes paralyzed. Meridian is ready to suffer and to die for black people's freedom, because she feels unworthy to live. She is full of guilt, because she has given up her child for adoption, and she has failed to please her own mother, by refusing motherhood and joining the Civil Rights Movement.

IV. Patriarchy and Her Liberation

Meridian is a black woman of courage, devoting herself to the cause of the Civil Rights Movement, and erasing her personal life for the sake of securing a better life of freedom and equality for the black people, Meridian has attained a sense of wholeness. She creates a sense of community with her people by giving up on any possibility of “ownership” by men, including Truman, even after his divorce from Lynne and the murder of his daughter Camara. Meridian was stigmatized by the Saxon teachers and girls because, It was kept secret from everyone that Meridian had

been married and divorced and had had a child. It was assumed that Saxon young ladies were, by definition, virgins. They were treated always as if they were thirteen years.

Meridian's personal life has shown her that sexism and racism have entrapped black women in a double encoding system. Her struggle for selfhood represents the black woman's resistance against the socioeconomic conditions reinforced by the colonialist representational paradigm. Meridian has carved out her own niche by sifting through her cultural heritage within a communal value-system. She reconnects with the black heritage and community in search for an Afro centric consciousness and a meaningful life beyond the sexual needs of men. Meridian has the courage to resist society's false definitions of black women.

Since the days of slavery, the African-American woman has always been the racial and sexual "other" in a white patriarchy society. The economics of slavery has produced the normative stereotypical mental representations of black women in society. The discursive and social positioning of the black female slave as sexual and immoral object became a strategy for safeguarding the position of the white male master as free from moral responsibility. The black women were the asexual maternal slave who took care of cooking, while also teaching the black children their assigned place in the race hierarchy. Controlled by the white patriarchal ideology, these negative images shaped black women's self-definition. The internalization of such images inevitably led to a negative self-perception, which not only affected black male/female relations, but also extends to the area of cultural conflict among members of the black community. The inability to share the mode of power appropriated by the white patriarchy forces the black women to redefine their self-images within the intra-

cultural network of relationships. Lynn Pifer writes about how Meridian is molested by males as:

Meridian, in fact, has been emotionally starved shut. Her mother has refused to tell her anything about sex, and Meridian only learns about it when she gets molested in a local funeral home. Meridian begins her relationship with Eddie mainly because she wants a boyfriend 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 having sex with him. (83)

Walker's women characters display strength, endurance, and resourcefulness in confronting and overcoming oppression in their lives. It is difficult for Meridian to see why a black man would be interested in white women, since she is not interested in white men. Black women's historic experience of rape by the white slave master and Meridian's mother's stories of white men's and boys' expectation that she, that all black women, would be sexually available to them, make it unthinkable to Meridian for a black woman to be interested in white men. Meridian, in consciously creating herself in the image of her black foremothers, identifies with their experience of rape by white men. Immersed in racial and gender oppression, her life is pitted over others' pain. Donna Krolik Hollenberg writes about the domination of the black males and repression of black sexual identity as:

Walker gives sexual racism a further twist in her depiction of its effect upon Lynne, whose self-consciousness as a Jew is repressed and belated. Despite her own minority status, Lynne has a higher place than Meridian in the sexual hierarchy because she is white. She is only half-conscious of this advantage at the beginning, but as Truman's

feeling for her sours, she comes to flaunt it, provocatively combing her long, straight hair in the presence of black women. (32)

In *Meridian*, the relationship between black men and white women is explored. Meridian fails to understand Truman's interest in white women because she does not consider that the historic relationship of black men to white women was different from that of black women to white men. White women were forbidden to black men during slavery. After slavery, lynching and the threat of lynching were used to "protect" white women from "rape" by black men and to terrorize all black people.

Young Southern black men in *Meridian*, described as "naïve" and "country boys," see Lynne as "a Route to Death, pure and simple," (137) when they first meet her. But Truman, who is more sophisticated and a Northerner, is interested in white women precisely because they have been forbidden to black men. Truman is divided against himself, rejecting Meridian for Lynne and other white women, yet affirming the beauty of black women in his art and wanting Meridian as an assertion of his blackness. Meridian Hill has been conditioned by her community's patriarchal institutions to repress her individuality and, above all, not to speak out inappropriately. Walker posits Meridian's struggle for personal transformation as an alternative to the political movements of the 1960s, particularly those that merely reproduced existing power structures. As Lynn Pifer forwards his views:

The novel points out that the Civil Rights Movement often reflected the oppressiveness of patriarchal capitalism. Activists merely turned political rhetoric to their own ends while continuing to repress spontaneous individuality. To overcome this destructiveness, Walker reaches for a new definition of revolution. Her hope for a just society

inheres not merely in political change, but in personal transformation.

(75)

Truman's relationship with Meridian is concerned with self-hatred and hatred of one another in relationships between black men and women. It was the rhetoric of black consciousness, created by the Civil Rights Movement. Truman's inner conflict is expressed mainly in his fixation on the women in his life and the grip that they have on him. Truman subscribes to traditional notions of gender roles, in which the man is the dominant force in a relationship, and his assumptions of male dominance are the source of his arrogance and short-sightedness.

Truman expects Meridian to uphold a standard of purity that he does not apply to himself, and in this way, he is a victim of the sexual attitudes of his world and times. He is drawn to powerful, intelligent, and charismatic women who only reveal the conflicted and confused man who exists beneath the dominant and stereotypical male behavior. Truman also struggles with his relationship to black culture. His interest in the movement, to which he initially dedicates much time and interest, sours. Only when he is freed of the various confusing presences and influences that mark his life, is Truman able to confront himself as an individual and fill his life with purpose and meaning.

Meridian and [Lynne](#) represent two extremes, and Truman is drawn to each but is unable to commit to either. Meridian ultimately frees herself of his mercurial affections and his confusing presence, which are obstacles to her physical and emotional recovery. Initially, in their student days, she believes that Truman is guilty of the same overly reductive and short-sighted racial patronage as Lynne, and that he fetishizes Lynne's whiteness just as Lynne lives vicariously through his blackness.

Truman can only objectify black women, casting them in mute marble or obsessively painting representations of Meridian that are far from the woman she actually is.

For Meridian to be a daughter of Harriet Tubman, a woman who frees herself and tries to free her people, she must give up her sexuality, as she has given up her motherhood. She must be alone, “that is my value” (220). Meridian, who chooses quest over romance, is more successful at creating herself than Lynne, who chooses romance over quest, who gives herself to Truman and is destroyed. Later Meridian becomes aware that the so-called intellectual climate offers a false definition of humanity. The climate does not even let the Sojourner, the symbol of an activist who worked against black enslavement to articulate the process of freedom. Seeing herself as the branch of the tradition the tree signifies, Meridian sets out for the South. She also gives up her relationship with Truman Held, her fellow Civil Rights Worker.

It is only white males that exploit black women. Black males were also equally joined in hand in hand. The attempt by black men to subordinate black women was influenced, in part, by the ideology of the Nation of Islam. Attempt to subordinate black women is also a response by some black men to the growing feminist consciousness of young black women toward the end of the Civil Rights Movement. At that time, black women, like their foremothers in the Anti-Slavery Movement in their relationship to the men in the Movement, an analogy to the racist oppression of black people. Writing about cultural invisibility and blindness based on racial identity. In connection with this Deborah Barker reveals:

While much critical attention has been focused on the interaction between music and language in African-American culture, the visual arts have been under-represented and under-analyzed. This is an especially egregious oversight, because the visual element of race is

inexorably linked to racial identity. How one is seen (as black), and, therefore, what one sees (in a white world), is always already crucial to one's existence as an Afro-American. The very markers that reveal you to the rest of the world, your dark skin and your kinky/curly hair, are visual. (45)

The feeling that she has been part of her mother's slavery coincides with her own feelings as a young mother that motherhood is indeed slavery. The fact that her mother went through pain, and endured, evokes in Meridian the fear of Black Motherhood, is great institution, her mother embodied. She rejects the roles of wife and mother, because she realizes that rigid role definitions are static and they deny human complexity and thereby suppress growth.

Meridian is taught at an early age by her mother not to trust white men. Her grandmother told her not to trust white women, as the mothers of would-be white oppressors for whom black women were just domestic babysitters, namely the Mammy. She has also experienced sexual harassment by Mr. Raymonds, a married black university professor. She terminates her second pregnancy with an abortion, and has her tubes tied. She has control over her body, as she discards her image as a sexual object in the eyes of men:

It seemed to Meridian that her legacy from her mother's endurance, her unerring knowledge of rightness and her pursuit of it through all distractions, was one she would never be able to match. It never occurred to her that her mother's and her grandmother's extreme purity of life was compelled by necessity. They had not lived in an age of choice. (124)

Meridian Hill is a silent, eccentric, and determined woman who has held onto her strength and dignity despite many hardships she has faced throughout her life. The events leading up to the opening chapters are dispersed throughout the novel in scattered, yet plausible flashbacks. Her life is filled with many unique people and events that shape her into a seemingly confident and free woman, the outcome being the opposite of what would normally be expected with her experiences.

She moves from place to place in this novel, sprinkling little pieces of resolve into the minds of all the townspeople who were fortunate enough to be in her presence. She seems accepting of religion near the novel's conclusion. She in fact rejects traditional notions of God and is attracted to church instead by black voices singing in unison. Moreover, she dismisses the notion of death as salvation. As she lies dying on the floor in the closing chapters, Meridian decides that black history has too many martyrs and leaves to regain her physical health.

Thus, the present dissertation focuses on Meridian's exploration of African-American identity. Meridian is portrayed as a poor, uneducated, black girl. She is ill-treated by white as well as black males as a play-thing. The Civil Rights Movement brings about a transformation within her. By taking part in the movement, Meridian is able to assert herself against patriarchy and white domination. At the end of the novel, Meridian emerges a strong and valiant woman who is able to explore her identity and help others like her in doing so.

Chapter Four

Conclusion

Rejuvenation of Meridian

Meridian's search for identity leaves her entangled in alienation, loss and ruin. Human identities which are always constituted, constructed, invented, imagined, imposed, projected, suffered, and celebrated are never discovered. Dealing with all levels of society and many different cultures and identity, Walker shows life's humor, harshness and brutality.

Political conflicts, like the Civil Rights Movement, leave the blacks struggling for a footing, amplifying mistrust and prejudice. As Walker explores the aspirations of Meridian, her invocation of her roots and identity, she also creates vivid pictures of the friends and relatives evoking vibrant images of a broad cross-section of a racist and patriarchal society, revealing its underbelly.

The ending of *Meridian* is bittersweet, not entirely happy, but not hopeless either. *Meridian* is more about a journey of human beings than anything else. It is the odyssey of a daring and confident girl who is able to assert herself as a woman in a racial and patriarchal society. From a shy, meek and weak teenager, Meridian Hill is able to establish an identity for herself. At the end, she emerges whole and healthy, thanks to her struggles and the hard-won wisdom that she has acquired along the way. It is a search that enables and encourages other girls and women like Meridian to rise up and fight for their identity. Meridian aspires to create an identity that comes with destructive consequences, but she comes out triumphant.

Meridian Hill in the beginning of the novel is a broken and damaged individual. She longs for guidance and a sense of belonging to what or where she is.

Unsure of the existence of God and her own relationship to the spiritual world, Meridian finds that traditional paths and explanations do not comfort her. The teenage girl is left mourning a love and loss she cannot articulate. She is dominated and exploited by the white people. To add to her misery, she is doubly suppressed and repressed by the black male patriarchy.

The fraught relationship that [Meridian](#) has with her mother casts a shadow over much of her life, and she struggles to overcome this and other obstacles as she searches for self-awareness and self-acceptance. In this confusion, she seems to have no sense of her identity, or what she is. The white people racially taunt her and give her no space in their world.

Then, the male blacks dominate her, treating her like their plaything. Her identity seems to be null and void. To claim her identity, Meridian has to challenge the black patriarchy and the racial whites. Meridian seems to crave an identity of her own. Longing is perhaps the thing that she does best. She longs for home, love and acceptance. Later, Meridian turns to the civil rights movement, which gains force and momentum during her young adult years. She questions her own revolutionary impulses after admitting her inability to kill on behalf of the movement. Feeling a gulf in her life between the ideals of the other civil rights activists and the ways by which they actually go about implementing change, Meridian returns to her roots, working and living in often-impoverished and rural communities.

Identities have a lot to do with images, imaginaries and the imagination. By invoking her roots, Meridian is able to garner the strength to fight and rise up against male hegemony and racial domination. Gradually, during her long struggle and her association with the movement, Meridian is able to create awareness among the oppressed people like her.

As many radical feminists blame motherhood for the waste in women's lives and saw it as a dead end for a woman, Walker insists on a deeper analysis. She did not present motherhood itself as restrictive. It is so because of the little value society places on children, especially black children, on mothers, especially black mothers, on life itself. Yet the novel is based on Meridian's insistence on the sacredness of life.

Meridian does not object to children, or mothers bearing children, but to the role a woman is expected to play once she becomes a mother. According to this role, a mother, particularly the Mythical Black Mother, should sacrifice her individual personality and concerns in order to live for her children. Unfortunately, the only way Meridian can escape this unwanted role is to leave her child and family, accepting her own mother's disapprobation. And to do so she must first learn to shed the guilt this action produces.

Thus, we see Meridian Hill is a young black woman participating in the Civil Rights Movement, represents an intersection between identity, race and gender as it was being culturally redefined during the political upheaval of the sixties and seventies. She not only confronts the image of "Beautiful White People" promoted by an objectifying white dominated mass media, but, more importantly, she sorts through the often uncomfortable interaction between mass media images and self-generated representations of racial and gender identity in African-American art and culture, including the legacy of black motherhood. Through this confrontation, Meridian learns how to "see" herself and therefore is able to search her identity.

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