



## Hybrid Marginality, Intercultural Bonding and Reconstruction of Black Motherhood in Alice Walker's *Meridian*

Farshid Nowrouzi Roshnavand,<sup>1</sup>

Assistant Professor of English Language and Literature, University of Mazandaran, Babolsar, Iran

### Article ID

CLS-1906-1018

### Article Info

Received Date: 23 June 2019

Reviewed Date: 29 July 2019

Accepted Date: 26 August 2019

### Suggested Citation

Nowrouzi Roshnavand, F. "Hybrid Marginality, Intercultural Bonding and Reconstruction of Black Motherhood in Alice Walker's *Meridian*." *Critical Literary Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 2, 2019, pp. 5-30.

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<sup>1</sup> f.nowrouzi@umz.ac.ir



## Abstract

Over the past few decades, African American feminist writers have tried to highlight black women's double marginalization in the United States and show how they are subalternized by both racist white society and sexist black community. The African American woman is traditionally confined to the domestic roles of a devoted wife and mother, thus required by the totalitarian patriarchal discourse to sacrifice her subjectivity for her husband and children. In her novel *Meridian* (1976), Alice Walker analyzes the marginality of women in the black community, noting how even a revolutionary movement like the Black Power embraced misogynist norms and demoted women to the status of the so-called second sex. Despite all obstacles, Walker's eponymous character, initially battered down by the weight of demeaning stereotypes, finally manages to save her selfhood by transcending the restrictive gender and racial demarcations and fashion a new independent identity. This paper tries to demonstrate how *Meridian* uses her marginal hybridity as a black woman to form emancipatory ties with other subalternized cultures, most notably that of Native Americans, borrow their discursive practices and ultimately disentangle herself from the fixating shackles of racism and sexism.

## Keywords

Black Feminism, *Meridian*, Motherhood, Black Power Movement, Native American

## 1. Introduction

D. K. Hollenberg (1991) contends that reading texts written by subaltern women is challenging because during the activity, "our self-concept is tested and stretched by visions stemming from worlds not identical with our own" (88). Notably, the same



expansive vision is acquired by the protagonist of Alice Walker's novel *Meridian*, first published in 1976, whose encounter with new cultural "texts" empowers her to surmount the quagmire of conventional gender clichés and fashion a new identity. The novel is a critique of the conventional morality espoused by the black American middle class and also a rejection of the stereotypical roles assigned to the black woman as a loyal wife, mother and daughter (Stein, 1986: 110).

Simultaneously subject to the racism of white society and sexism of the black community, *Meridian* starts her quest for selfhood and liberation as a hybrid figure "on the periphery of the road;" that is, in the interstices of dominant discriminatory discourses which deny her agency and subjectivity (Brown, 1989: 311). H. K. Bhabha (1994), the Indian postcolonial scholar, contends that the hybrid marginal identity, which is traditionally viewed as a bane, can also function as a boon. In *Meridian*'s case, her hybrid position in-between the racist and sexist discourses enables her to form a rapport with other subaltern identities and also to reconnect the present to those aspects of the past which have been erased by masculinist historiography in favor of conformist occurrence and figures. As L. E. Wingard (2012) states, the novel "highlights ways of interacting with others to promote change" (111).

We should heed the important fact that a character, society or historical moment (whether egalitarian or oppressive) is neither created in a vacuum nor just by one single factor such as gender, race, class, sexual orientation, religion, etc., but by the "intersectionality" of all these categories (West, Donovan, & Daniel, 2016: 391). Since these demarcations are always merging, re-emerging and colliding, an "inter-" and "trans-" approach is required to analyze the prevalent discriminations and find a way to end them.

*Meridian* tries to balance her racial identity (and its cumbersome expectations of her as a black wife/mother) with her subjectivity as a free woman. In order for this ambitious project to realize, Walker suggests rewriting history as a strategy which greatly contributes to the process of independent identity construction liberated from the yokes of conventional morality and its inflexible classifications. L. S. Cardon (2011) traces such a critical approach towards exclusionary discourses in Walker's work, further stating that the writer aims to show the pitfalls of prejudiced, desubjectifying demarcations:



While the novel prioritizes ethnic and cultural identification, *Meridian* also challenges traditional and limiting notions of identity construction based solely on one aspect of a person's identity, whether it be race, religion, gender, or something else, showing how such notions can invest individuals with a sense of belonging yet at the same time fail to capture the complexity of individual identity. (180)

The following sections of the article intend to show how *Meridian*, as a hybrid consciousness, manages to overcome the stereotypical roles assigned to her as a black woman by forming intercultural and trans-historical bonds with other marginalized groups.

## 2. Discussion

### 2.1. *Meridian* & the Dilemma of Black Motherhood

Alice Walker's *Meridian* addresses the conflict between the conventional image of black motherhood (and the expectations and requirements attached to it) and the mid-twentieth century black woman's quest for independence and voice through sociopolitical activism and individual, mystical transformation. The novel depicts the protagonist Meridian Hill as an iconoclastic, discontented figure even in her childhood and adolescent years. For instance, as "a young girl unable or unwilling to adjust to the roles delineated for her by her community" (Danielson, 1989: 319), she refused to accept Christianity and "be saved" much to her conventional mother's dismay (Walker, 1985: 16). She also showed an unorthodox behavior in a high school contest where she, all of a sudden, stopped answering questions about the US Constitution upon the epiphanic discovery of the emptiness of its slogans (Walker, 1985: 119-120). However, even such an iconoclastic personage is driven under societal pressures into accepting the institutionalized roles of wife and mother after she unwantedly becomes pregnant as a result of a free love affair with her boyfriend (and future husband), Eddie.

The conventional African American community might condone *Meridian*'s libertarian pre-marriage sexuality, but it can never overlook the intentional transgression of the sacrosanct role of motherhood, a much vaunted reminiscence of



black women's staying power in the face of harsh living conditions as slaves in the South. As soon as Meridian gave birth to Eddie Jr., she was forced to assume a great responsibility which obligated her to give up her self and independence for her newly born baby. Though everyone regarded Meridian as a kind deserving mother based on her calm exterior and even praised her serenity as a seventeen-year-old mother, she was engulfed in such a deep psychological turmoil that she even considered murdering the child. Noting that infanticide was an unforgivable crime in the black community, Meridian entertained the thoughts of committing suicide rather than surrendering her freedom. We can trace the root of Meridian's aversion to motherhood back to her strained relationship with her own mother who lost her leverage as an autonomous, successful teacher in the black community after her marriage, and who resented her husband and children for such a considerable loss. Unable to face reality and blame herself for her passivity, she further turned into an agent of androcentric Christianity and conventional morality within the black community.

Even as a child, Meridian could sense her mother's antipathy to her children and thus felt an unendurable guilt over her share in Mrs. Hill's unfulfilled life as a potentially creative woman (Cardon, 2011: 169). This feeling of self-blame was aggravated after her divorce from her husband and her subsequent decision to leave her son to be adopted by another family so that she could go to college (Tucker, 1991: 3-4). In effect, Meridian decided to sacrifice her motherhood instead of sacrificing herself even though this act pushed her to the farthest limits of marginality as a divorcee in the black community (Sadoff, 1985: 23). This decision infuriated her conventional mother who rejected the adoption issue as immoral and monstrous: "I just don't see how you could let another woman raise your child ... It's just selfishness. You ought to hang your head in shame. I have six children ... though I never wanted to have any, and I have raised every one myself" (86).

At this point in the novel, Meridian showed her double-mindedness as she simultaneously rejected and envied the patriarchal edifice of motherhood. Though her adoption choice was consciously made to avoid a similar fate to her mother's, Meridian nonetheless felt guilty and reprehensible for betraying her female slave ancestresses who had been ready to stoop to anything sordid just to keep and



nurture their children: “Meridian knew that enslaved women had been made miserable by the sale of their children, that 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.” But she had given up her son not to lose her chance of receiving academic education and this made her feel “condemned, consigned to penitence, for life” (87).

Meridian believed that “she had saved a small person’s life” by letting her son be raised by another family. Even so, she constantly heard a voice in her head (i.e., the internalized voice of her mother and, on a broader scale, of the patriarchal society and the church) which reminded her of and lambasted her for her disloyalty to the standard of black motherhood. The voice also invited her to commit suicide to atone for her treachery: “Why don’t you die? Why not kill yourself? Jump into the traffic! Lie down under the wheels of that big truck! Jump off the roof!” (88). As we can see, the only fate that the patriarchal society envisions for a woman who does not fit its strict codifications is death and destruction.

One day, when Meridian was watching television, she saw a number of black and white activists involved in the Civil Rights Movement working together in a nearby house, an incident which broadened her horizons and made her familiar with the outside world. The next day, the news broadcasted that the activists’ house was demolished in a bomb attack by the opponents of the movement. According to L. Tucker, the demolition of the house, though planned and carried out by racist white radicals, symbolized the collapse of the very “domestic” structure that had entrapped Meridian, her mother and in general, black (and white) women within its limits. It was only then that Meridian was convinced that her path toward freedom passed through sociopolitical activism (1991: 4).

The Civil Rights Movement proved to be a watershed for the protagonist who as an active participant, noted that it provided a theoretical framework through which both races and both genders could cooperate as equals. This new socio-historical consciousness finds another significance if we note that “Meridian’s awakening to the Movement comes at a time when her life appears to be shaping itself into defeated molds from the past” (Danielson, 1989: 318). In effect, she gravitated towards the movement as a substitute for white racism and black patriarchy, hence an opportunity



for her to become a maker of history rather than its passive victim (Barker, 1997: 473-474). However, the facile optimism of the movement's slogan "Black and White Together" soon turned into bitter discontent after the racist white establishment quelled the mostly pacifist demonstrations of the movement with an iron hand, arresting, injuring and killing a number of activists (Breines, 1996: 103).

Witnessing the white government's unabated violence against minorities and claiming that the non-violent strategies à la Gandhi would never invoke any palpable change in the policies of the US government, some black Americans resorted to nationalism, Pan-Africanism, and even armed confrontation as the only remaining ways to eradicate white supremacy. Out of this radical chauvinism the Black Power Movement was born, which earnestly urged "the construction of a cohesive racial identity distinct from other ethnic groups and the dominant culture" (Cardon, 2011: 164).

Replacing the integrationist "Black and White Together" with "Black Power" (Danielson, 1989: 318), the new movement embraced a segregationist ideology and forbade the participation of whites in the African American struggle for freedom except for local, trivial positions, an injunction which garnered harsh criticisms from both black and white activists, including Martin Luther King Jr. who denounced the new movement's agenda as "racism in reverse" (Smith, 2003: 44). However, it was not only whites whom the Black Power Movement excluded; women were also greatly marginalized within its masculinist discourse which asserted that the only position available to black women in the movement was that of prone (Lewis, 2012: 163), hence a mere continuation of the True Woman stereotype with its emphasis upon absolute obedience and self-sacrifice. As B. Sizemore writes of the role of the black woman in the movement, "Her main goal is to inspire and encourage man and his children. Sisters in this movement must beg for permission to speak and function as servants to men" (as cited in Hendrickson, 1999: 112). In other words, the Black Power Movement described blackness in terms of masculinist chauvinism, a definition which was reprehended by Walker and other excluded black women. To them, it did not matter "if those who define blackness are now black instead of white" since any discriminatory discourse (be it the racism of the white society or the sexism



of black separatists) would result in the denial of “human agency and complexity” in all its forms (Hendrickson, 1999: 121).

The ideological tension between the two political discourses was captured in the novel in the character of Meridian’s post-divorce lover, Truman Held, who was actively involved in both movements. Though professing his love for Meridian, Truman left her for some white exchange students from North who had come South to take part in the Civil Rights Movement. Vacillating between blacks and whites as a result of his entrenched double consciousness, Truman came back to Meridian, but once again left her as soon as he realized after a sexual intercourse that she had not been a virgin and more importantly, that she had given up her son for adoption (Danielson, 1989: 324). Though concealed under the veneer of a democratic equality-seeking man, Truman, as his name suggests, was still a True Man (Stein, 1986: 135) and thus would naturally expect Meridian (and all other black and white women) to embody True Womanhood: “How could he have a wife who already had a child? And that she had given that child away. What repugnance there arose in him for her” (140).

Influenced by the egalitarian ethos of the Civil Rights Movement, Truman even married one of the white exchange students named Lynne who used to cooperate with Meridian in encouraging poor black southerners to register to vote. Truman’s decision to abandon Meridian and marry a white woman left an indelible impression on the protagonist’s mind. Thereupon, when she understood that she was pregnant with Truman’s child, she aborted the fetus and sterilized herself, having eventually made up her mind that the patriarchal notion of motherhood would always fail her. Meridian’s disillusionment and frustration with Truman, as the emblem of the (misogynist) black community’s call for change and equality, convinced her that she should continue her quest for freedom in other realms than that of politics: she opted for internal transformation through Native American mysticism.

## 2.2. Hybrid Marginality, Native American Mysticism and Writing Herstory

Walker was an admirer of Native American culture, believing that it shared a prominent similarity with the African *weltanschauung*: “If there is one thing African





Americans and Native Americans have retained of their African and ancient American heritage, it is probably the belief that everything is inhabited by spirit" (as cited in Downey, 1994: 37). She reflected her interest in animism in *Meridian* where Native American mystical culture catalyzed the eponymous character's quest for individuation. In the novel, the Native American myth bridges the distance between Meridian and her past, allowing her to find those of her foremothers who were different from the stereotypical representations of black women. These unconventional figures did not embrace the assigned role of She Who Bears (the word "bear" denotes both patience and pregnancy) and instead transformed into She Who Thinks (Tucker, 1991: 15).

It goes without saying that black women were doubly marginalized in the United States due to the prevalent discrimination against them by the racist white society and sexist African American community. And so was Meridian who experienced both of the subalternizing discourses in her life. Once a teenager, she witnessed how the government confiscated her father's rightful land to create an all-white park to which blacks were denied entry. Because of her father, Meridian also came to know as a child that the racist policies of the white establishment had victimized more racial, ethnic, gender and class groups than the two marginalized positions of blackness and womanhood. Meridian's father was extremely sensitive to the plight of Native Americans who were massacred and displaced in large numbers upon the settlers' greed to appropriate more land and thus harvest more economic profit. So from early in her life, Meridian developed a sympathetic sensitivity to the suffering of Others/others, including her harsh and unaffectionate mother, and this attitude eventually transpired as her saving grace. Meridian gradually made the conviction that no exclusionary discourse would ultimately manage to root out oppression because any disregard of discriminatory practices against other marginalized groups would merely perpetuate the patterns of violence, deprivation and subalternity.

Conscious of these limitations, the protagonist used her in-between position as a springboard to construct an all-encompassing discourse which could redeem not only black women, but also black men (like Truman), white women (like Lynne), Native Americans and all other oppressed individuals and groups. That is to say, Meridian's new discourse gives rise to an identity which transcends all exclusive and



dichotomous categories such as white/black, man/woman, etc. and provides subaltern individuals and groups with an opportunity to move beyond the restrictions conventionally attached to their peripheral positions. Meridian's hybridity, for once depicted in her ambivalent attitude towards motherhood, can be analyzed in the light of L. E. Wingard's notion of "productive dissonance" which points to those differential structures tending to align rather than separate (2012: 98). This means that the psychological and physical pains which Meridian underwent as a result of her ambivalence finally motivated her to reclaim her forgotten roots and puncture the dominant power in this way.

Meridian's doubly marginalized position as a black woman made her a hybrid in the Bhabhite sense of the term. Decentered and Otherized, she was living on the edge of the racist and sexist ideologies which relentlessly denied her recognition and respect. As Bhabha (1994) states, the hybrid position can help the subaltern transcend the ideological constructs of race, gender, ethnicity and class, and establish an all-too-necessary bonding with other minorities. Cognizant of the shortcomings of a parochial political view such as that of Truman and his like-minded revolutionaries in the Black Power Movement, Meridian firmly believed that racism, as a mode of oppression, would come to an end only if other oppressive regimes, and most notably capitalism, were eradicated (Sadoff, 1985: 23). Furthermore, the construction of a new independent identity and a transcendent sociopolitical consciousness are not possible without rewriting history. In other words, the anti-discrimination project will never work out without unearthing the silenced past of the oppressed groups and stripping history off its discriminatory representational strategies. In order to destabilize and delegitimize the absolutist Power, one should not only look back to the past for inspiration; she further needs to "write back" the past and embrace it with all its fortes and foibles; it is only then that she can find the required means to re-construct the present and prepare the grounds for a different egalitarian future.

From Meridian's perspective, slavery and its stifling atmosphere were not yet over for black women since she regarded motherhood and its fixating obligations as other forms of bondage (Tucker, 1991: 4). The idea of a Superwoman who put up with savage racism for the good of the black community seemed obsolete and fallacious



to the eponymous character, who noted that black women like her mother had received nothing in return for their altruistic devotion except an ingrained feeling of resentment, disillusionment and infuriation. So she resolved to re-member both antebellum and post-bellum eras to find those women who actively refused to surrender to the strong black mother stereotype. This discovery was crucial for Meridian who was not able to relieve herself of the pangs of guilt and remorse over her “monstrous” desire not to be a mother in the patriarchal sense of the concept.

Notably, Meridian’s struggle to discover (or we would better say, recover) her past was facilitated and channeled by another marginal culture located on the periphery of the dominant exclusionary discourse: that of Native Americans. As mentioned earlier, the protagonist and her father cared so much for the plight of the so-called Indians who shared a similar history of subordination and deprivation with African slaves. The novel’s epigraph was taken from the words of an Oglala Lakota visionary man who late in his life recalled and lamented the massacre of Native Americans by white settlers and the destruction of the tribal way of life: “I can still see the butchered women and children lying heaped and scattered all along the crooked gulch as plain as when I saw them with eyes still young. And I can see that something else died there in the bloody mud, and was buried in the blizzard. A people’s dream died there. It was a beautiful dream ... the nation’s hoop is broken and scattered. There is no center any longer, and the sacred tree is dead.”

As we can see, his main concern was the annihilation of the nation’s hoop and the ensuing fragmentation. In the Native American culture, the hoop is a sacred symbol which stands for the regenerative power of community. This symbol finds a new significance if we analyze Black Elk’s “Great Vision” experience. The incident was recorded in detail in the book *Black Elk Speaks*, which J. Neihardt compiled, translated and published in 1932. When Black Elk was seriously ill at the age of nine, he entered into a trance in which he saw himself “standing on the highest mountain” while “the whole hoop of the world” was beneath him. The important point in his vision was the interconnectedness of all elements in the world which finally constituted the One Life: “And I saw that the sacred hoop of my people was one of many hoops that made one circle, ... and in the center grew one mighty flowering tree to shelter all the children of one mother and one father. And I saw that it was holy” (as cited in Downey,



1994: 40). Further in the trance, he met six of his grandfathers whose overwhelming presence apprised him of the close link between the living and the dead (Tucker, 1991: 7). Following the vision, Black Elk recovered from the illness and from then onwards, adopted the role of an intermediary between the universe and his people, trying to convey the invaluable messages he was confided in during the dream. The same preoccupations can be seen in traditional African American religions which similarly address man's position in and relationship to the universe and also the cyclical pattern of life and creation (D. Zahan, as cited in Brown 1989: 318-9).

To A. M. Downey, Black Elk's mournful epigraph is the call to restoring the wholeness of the universe's hoop and Meridian's actions throughout the novel is a response to this call (1994: 38). As mentioned earlier, *Meridian* started with the admonition that the sacred hoop is broken. Considering the content of the novel, it was implied that this has happened because the universe is beset with such discriminatory oppressive ideologies as racism, sexism, capitalism, etc., each of which prioritizes the interests of one single group over the larger community.

As an ideology which believed in the interconnectedness of all universal elements and all hoops, the Native American mystical visionary experience provided the protagonist with an opportunity to unearth her past and communicate with her ancestresses (Downey, 1994: 41). It was only through the reclamation of her heritage, or what Susan Danielson calls the "female principle" (1989: 329), that she found redemption at the end of the story. As Tucker asserts, Meridian "must recognize her maternal history and its empowering dynamism" in order to "go beyond her mother" and find a new lease of life (1991: 9).

Similar to Black Elk who witnessed the partial extermination of his people by the juggernaut of colonization, Meridian also sensed large-scale injustice in society and came to this realization that the world's regenerative circle was damaged. Moreover, the eponymous character also fathomed that "she has only the stories of her foremothers as sustenance" (Brown, 1989: 314). So as Black Elk saw his grandfathers in the vision and understood the inseparability of the living and the dead, Meridian likewise started to search for her female roots in an attempt to launch resistance against hegemony. According to Cardon, "Meridian's negotiation of identity is not



only outward and inward, but also backward” (2001: 161), that is, toward her ancestral roots.

In effect, Meridian partly overcame her feelings of shame and guilt by forming ties with her past and especially with her foremothers. Unlike Mrs. Hill who commemorated the suffering of black mothers, Meridian looked back to her female ancestral roots in order to find possibilities of individual liberation. To the protagonist, suffering and sacrifice were not the only words which could describe black women’s existence. Preoccupied with the history of her ancestresses, she finally managed to find a repressed tradition of resistance to oppression among her foremothers which could bring them a kind of insurgent ecstasy (McGowan, 1981: 25-28). Though Meridian was advised by her mother to “trust in God, hold up her head, [and] never look back” (120), she audaciously questioned what she had inherited as the history of her grandmothers and revived the silenced parts and figures. It is in fact this “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” which finally freed Meridian from torment (Hendrickson, 1999:116).

As her first step towards discovering resistant women, Meridian traced this empathic bond between the two minorities, i.e., (female) African Americans and Native Americans, back to her father’s grandmother, Feather Mae, an unconventional woman who was thought to be afflicted with “some slight and harmless madness” (49). However, according to Michel Foucault, the invective “mad” was merely a tool to discard any out-of-norm beliefs and actions. As J. A. Brown asserts, “What for these men and women is a blessed state is often the manifestation of obsessive, delusional, or pathological behavior to others” (1989: 314).

Even as a girl, Feather Mae was cognizant of the unfortunate fate that was inscribed for black women upon marriage: “she was becoming a woman ... and would soon be married, soon be expecting, soon be like her own mother, a strong silent woman who seemed always to be washing or ironing or cooking” (49). Despite all this, her unconventionality allowed her to remove the restrictive barriers and enjoy a sense of freedom and ecstasy denied to the likes of her slave mother. Before marriage, she used to go to the Sacred Serpent, a burial mound of Native Americans. There, she sat “on the Serpent’s back, her long legs dangling while she sucked on a



weed stem” and “dreamed, with the sun across her legs and her back, moon-bright face open to the view” (49). The sexual symbolism employed in the sentences (a young unmarried girl freely dangling her legs and sucking on a phallic object) connotes a kind of psycho-sexual *jouissance* which could hardly be attained by other repressed black women.

Once Feather Mae ventured into the middle of the cemetery, she experienced “strange spiritual intoxication” (50). This enabled her to openly oppose societal fixating roles and requirements: “She felt as if she had stepped into another world, into a different kind of air ... She knew she had fainted but she felt neither weakened nor ill. She felt renewed” (49). Feeling liberated and empowered, Feathered Mae dared the (blanched) black community and its conservative Baptist church by rejecting “all religion that was not based on the experience of physical ecstasy.” Even more disturbing to black moralists, she developed a liking for “walking nude about her yard and worshipped only the sun” late in her life (50).

Appreciative of this newly found vision even after marriage, she warned her husband against flattening the Sacred Serpent and using it as a farm: “It may not mean anything to you to plant food over other folks’ bones, ... but if you do you needn’t expect me to eat another mouthful in your house!” (49) Such self-assertive threatening remarks uttered in an age which unabashedly reduced black women to the status of breeders and chattels, signify a resistant attitude which could force the patriarchy to step back and compromise its reifying expectations of the so-called second sex.

There were three other foremothers prominent in Meridian’s knowledge of her family *herstory*. Firstly, her mother’s great-great-grandmother is remembered/re-remembered by Meridian. An enslaved mother, she decided to steal her two children who had been sold to other plantations, a deed for which she was severely punished. Noting her unflinching determination, the slaveholders finally let her keep his children “on the condition that they would eat no food she did not provide herself” (121). She gradually starved to death to feed her children, a struggle which turned out to be futile as the two children were finally sold on the very day their mother was interred.

The next female role model was her mother’s great grandmother who was “famous for painting decorations on barns,” and finally managed to buy freedom for herself



and her husband and children through her art. Being economically and spiritually independent, she dared to produce her own artistic “trademark” which could not be deciphered and categorized based on conventional norms: “At the center of each tree or animal or bird she painted, there was somehow drawn in ... a small contorted face – whether of man or woman or child, no one could tell” (121).

Her maternal grandmother was the last ancestress that Meridian knew of and looked up to. This personage is of great significance considering Walker’s emphasis upon the fact that women’s enslavement had ruthlessly continued even after the Emancipation. Meridian’s grandmother was not born into slavery and as a free woman, married a guy who was regarded by the black community as a respectful gentleman. Nevertheless, there was more to his character which had gone neglected (or better to say, condoned) by the sexist power structure: “He was a person who kept his word, ran a prosperous farm and had a handsome face. But he also had no desire to raise children – though he enjoyed sex with any willing, good-looking woman who came his way – and he beat his wife and children with more pleasure than he beat his mules” (121-122). Walker’s description of Meridian’s grandfather is quite revealing as it clearly shows that the Emancipation had basically failed to carry out its promise to liberate *all* slaves: for African American women, the white master was merely supplanted by a black one, while they were still pinned to the status of animals and sexual objects.

Meridian appreciated the perseverance of her ancestresses, their faithful adherence to the role of motherhood and also their staunch determination to provide for their children, a reverence which resulted in her crushing self-blame over failing to follow their example. However, as the narratorial voice reminds, she was oblivious to the fact that her foremothers “had not lived in an age of choice” and their self-denial “was compelled by necessity” (123). To claim that Meridian was living in an age of choice is evidently so simplistic a reading in that the black woman’s subjectivity was recognized neither by black/white men nor by white women feminists in the mid-twentieth century. Nonetheless, Meridian decided to shatter the stereotypes by adopting the free and autonomous *weltanschauung* of Feather Mae and her mother’s artistic great-grandmother. These two figures provided a version of womanhood/motherhood different from the sexist notion of black matrilineage.



Meridian looked back/up to her unorthodox artistic ancestors who made most of their limited materials and brought about a significant change, albeit personal and small-scale (Barker, 1997: 467-468).

Disowned by her mother and separated from her husband, Meridian was an isolated figure whose presence was underpinned by a fixed and fixating past. However, Meridian tried to detect the counter-discursive and “transformative moments in the past” by reviving “a legacy of female models” (Cardon, 2011: 161). It should be noted that Meridian’s re-remembrance of the past was not “backward” in the sense of retarded and reactionary, but was aimed at the amelioration and reconstruction of both present and future (Duck, 2008: 447). According to Danielson, “Her essential ties to a black female community ... provide[s] one of the sources ... for her eventual movement toward health” (1898: 324).

Before her marriage, the protagonist started her mystical journey by entering the same Native American cemetery which had transformed and saved Feather Mae. The fact that “she was surrounded by the dead” in the mound and also the knowledge that “she was a dot, a speck in creation” frightened Meridian, the neophyte seeker of independence and freedom. Still and all, she managed to quench her fear after “she remembered Feather Mae” and subsequently, the Native American-induced trance of freedom occurred to her: “It was as if the walls of earth that enclosed her rushed outward, leveling themselves at a dizzying rate, and then spinning wildly, lifting her out of her body and giving her the feeling of flying. And in this movement she saw the faces of her family, the branches of trees, the wings of birds, the corners of houses, blades of grass and petals of flowers rush toward a central point high above her and she was drawn with them, as whirling, as bright, as free, as they” (50-51).

The vision helped Meridian grasp her position in the cycle of creation and the interconnectedness of the living and the dead. This was the first sign of hope that showed the protagonist how she could use her marginal position as a black woman to surmount the limitations imposed by racist and sexist discourses. In fact, the novel shows that there can be a “Third Space” other than assimilation (evident in Mrs. Hill’s internalization of patriarchal norms) and racism-in-reverse (captured in Truman’s Pan-Africanist and nationalist tendencies): intercultural bonding without the erasure of discursive differences. In fact, any project of reorienting the past for the sake of





the present and the future would remain abortive if it fails to open up “more heterogeneous spaces” which tolerate difference and facilitate the establishment of new ties (Duck, 2008: 463).

This exchange between hybrid positions paves the way for the reevaluation of the narratives of marginality. The result of such a revisionist attitude in the novel was the unprecedented interaction between Native Americans and blacks, the dead and the living, and the past and the present in the novel. It should be borne in mind that the vision summoned at the cemetery was the beginning of Meridian’s movement towards freedom and sociopolitical mobility. The weight of patriarchal stereotypes was so unbearable that it required even an unconventional figure like Meridian to devote a great deal of time and energy to overcome the feelings of guilt and shame over her failure to play the society’s assigned roles.

### 2.3. Meridian’s Quest for Surrogate Motherhood

Meridian’s dual ambivalent state of mind regarding motherhood was manifest in the scene in which she was finally relieved of her chronic self-vilification. Then a student at Saxon College, an assimilationist institution “segregated by race and sex” which promoted the patriarchal conception of True Womanhood (Barker, 1997: 474), Meridian suffered from bouts of catatonia, temporary blindness, anorexia and most revealingly, paralysis. Tucker attributes the protagonist’s physical illness to her partial internalization of and respect for misogynist representations of black wifehood/motherhood as advertised by Mrs. Hill and the college authorities (1991: 5-7). We need to heed the consequential point that that Meridian did not reject the institution of motherhood altogether, but had profound and serious reservations about its concomitant desubjectifying obligations; that is, when it became a “requirement rather than a right” (Barker, 1997: 468). According to Cardon “While Meridian does not judge women who choose to be wives or mothers, she resents the notion that a woman must fall into one of these roles—or any predetermined role” (2011: 168).

While still a Saxon student, Meridian inclined towards “metaphorical and compensatory motherhood” to atone for her feelings of maternal inadequacy (Sadoff, 1985: 23). She unofficially adopted a teenage street girl named Wile Chile (Wild Child)



whose behavior went against the strict codes of ethics as called forth by her mother, the black church and Saxon College. Unlike the middle-class students who were “as chaste and pure as the driven snow” (89), Wile Chile was a poor dirty girl who was always found looking for food in the debris in a slum near the college. More disturbing to bourgeois respectability, she had started smoking at the age of eight and cursing was “the only language she knew.” When Meridian found out that Wile Chile was pregnant, she made up her mind to help her. Unruly as Wile Chile was, Meridian put a lot of effort to “capture” the girl and bring her to the campus. Meridian gave her a bath while Wile Chile “shouted words that were never uttered in the honors house.” She was then taken to dinner where she “upset her tablemates with the uncouthness of her manners” (24). Seeing her insolent behavior and obscene language as a threat to Saxon’s reputation, the campus authority, ironically introduced in the novel as “the house mother,” ordered Wile Chile out of the campus, saying, “She must not stay here ... Think of the influence. This is a school for young ladies” (25). As exclusive as the racist, misogynist Cult of True Womanhood, black Americans’ morality had similarly no room for any unorthodox figure like Wile Chile and even Meridian herself, or as Stein aptly maintains, for any “unbridled” and “unbridled” woman (1986: 136). Hearing the house mother’s decree, Wile Chile escaped from the campus the next morning and was hit by a car and killed as she was running across the street.

The episode clearly drew a contrast between the house mother and Meridian. The authoritarian figure, perhaps a real mother herself, just reproduced the sententious moralizing ethos of the bourgeois black society. However, she failed to play a maternal role for Wile Chile since the poor pregnant girl did not conform to the society’s conception of ladyhood and in the near future, motherhood. This is while Meridian, a monster in society’s eyes for having left her child, acted as a caring responsible mother for a rejected dispossessed girl. This was the protagonist’s first attempt to appease her enervating feeling of maternal inadequacy, a struggle which turned out to be unavailing (McGowan, 1981: 31; Sadoff, 1985: 23).

Notwithstanding, there was an unconventional professor in Saxon who served as a “surrogate” mother for Meridian and helped her recover from the paralyzing effects of racist and sexist discourses: Miss Winter (Tucker, 1991: 8), who, the novel describes, was deemed “a misfit” as “one of only three black teachers on the faculty;”



she “deliberately rose against Saxon tradition to teach jazz ... and spirituals and the blues” (118), all manifestations of black Americans’ distinctive creativity and artistry in the field of music. As one might expect, her decision to include black art forms in the curriculum did not appeal to Saxon’s accommodationist agenda.

One day when Miss Winter went to Meridian’s room to see about her deteriorating health, the sickly protagonist was in a hallucination: “she dreamed she was on a ship with her mother, and her mother was holding her over the railing about to drop her into the sea. Danger was all around and her mother refused to let her go.” Though she deeply respected her mother despite her parochial worldview, Meridian preferred the dangers of the sea (here emblematic of sociopolitical activism) to the alleged stability of her mother’s side on the ship (symbolizing the fixed position of the black woman in the patriarchal society). While hallucinating, Meridian whispered, “Mama, I love you. Let me go” (emphasis in original). However, her real mother had been so stuck in the moralistic discourse of the church and its misogynist clichés that she would never have let her irresponsible daughter go. Hence Miss Winter entered the equation here and played the role of a caring mother: “Instinctively, as if Meridian were her own child, Miss Winter answered, close to her ear on the pillow, ‘I forgive you’” (123).

Throughout the novel, we are constantly reminded that “the real purpose of Saxon College is not to pursue intellectual independence, but to produce marriageable young women” (Stein, 1986: 135). The fact that a Miss could assume the role of an affectionate forgiving mother for Meridian nullified the notion of motherhood as essentially contingent upon the institution of marriage. Moreover, the maternal role was not taken up by a devoted God-fearing housewife, but by an active university professor whose name symbolized northern cleansing wind in Native American culture (Tucker, 1991: 8). Far from being an angel in the house, Miss Winter had also lived for a while in Europe and thus had a cosmopolitan experience.

The protagonist gradually came to identify the college as a place of “spiritual degeneration” (88) while what she needed and searched for was spiritual rebirth. Following Miss Winter’s helpful presence as a surrogate mother, Meridian, the redeemed mystic, started a new life and embarked on a version of political activism which was so much different from violent and separatist ethos of the Black Power



Movement. Leaving the college, she went South to live among the poor and help them through the vicissitudes the life (Downey, 1994: 41; Hendrickson, 1999: 114).

## 2.4. Meridian's Expiatory Sojourn in South: Revisiting Motherhood

While composing *Meridian*, Walker intended it to be entitled "Atonement and Release," the words which she later used to name two chapters in the final part of the work. As the original title suggests, the protagonist could totally free herself from the burden of societal expectations and self-reproach only if she had atoned for her past *sins*. M. J. McGowan contends that Meridian's motives to travel to South were "expiatory in nature" because during the journey, she managed to put aside her feeling of inadequacy and practice motherhood once again (1981: 29).

For this reason, Meriden gradually got rid of many of her properties (except for a sleeping bag and other sundries) in an attempt to transcend her self and live like the poor (Sadoff, 1985: 15). This self-sacrifice was different from the one required in the cult of black motherhood as the protagonist *chose* this kind of lifestyle among so many others, while the motherhood stereotype dictated solely one role and one lifestyle, leaving no place for women's freedom of choice. Meridian now knew that political activism could not by itself bring about a drastic change in society if it was not accompanied by an internal spiritual transformation (Cardon, 2011: 161; Stein, 1986: 130; Duck, 2008: 440). The protagonist's new knowledge also ascertained that remaining in the cocoon of interiority and ignoring Others/others would be a flagrant mistake as it belied the ultimate purpose and oneness of the universe. This precious mystical wisdom was procured and then put to practice with the aid of Native American mystical vision and her two revolutionary and resistant ancestresses, Feather Mae and the nameless artist foremother.

Taking her inspiration from Feather Mae, Meridian came to recognize her status as a "hoop" in the cycle of creation alongside Other/other hoops. She also discovered a significant interconnectivity between concepts and positions which had come to be viewed as totally separate and distinct from one another. Additionally, she realized that she was responsible to transfer this knowledge to other subalterns and in order for that to happen, she decided to "perform" this vision for the poor black southerners.



Similar to the artist foremother who used an unintelligible pattern as her unique painting signature, Meridian also domesticated her mystical knowledge coming from her interaction as a hybrid consciousness with a different culture (Native Americans') and a different mode of existence (the dead black women who were historically deemed as no more than domestic servants and self-abnegating mothers). Her transformative and emancipatory political agenda first addressed the distress of the black community, especially the impoverished, and later even included Truman, the black bourgeois patriarch, and his wife, Lynne, the white Jewish outcast who lived as a pariah on the rim of both white and black communities. This trans-racial, trans-national, trans-classist and trans-gendered attitude echoes the possibility of an intersubjective hybrid position which can transcend all boundaries and form resistant networks across margins against hierarchal regimes of power.

Free from the shackles of society and its fixating categories, Meridian was ready to become a mother again despite having undergone sterilization, a role that was divested of its desubjectifying obligations and now bestowed love and affection on whoever was in need regardless of their gender, class, race or political side-taking. As a hybrid who undermined all conventional representational strategies, Meridian constructed her subjectivity (and also her new conception of motherhood) into "a presence which defies all representation" (Brown, 1989: 312).

There were two major scenes in the second part of the novel which depicted Meridian's acting out as a surrogate mother. In the first scene, Meridian was portrayed carrying the corpse of a small boy who had lost his life because of the white municipality's indifference towards the implementation of safety measures in a huge water reservoir in a poor black neighborhood. Following the incident, the charismatic Meridian mobilized the mourning people and launched a symbolic anti-establishment march: she "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. The child's body was so ravaged, so grotesque, so disgusting to behold, his own mother had taken one look and refused to touch him" (195).

The extract shows that Meridian willingly assumed the role of a surrogate mother for the dead boy whose mother had rejected him (Wingard, 2012: 111). Furthermore,



Brown noted that the protagonist acted as a leader for the protesting blacks (1989: 316) who, as the story reads, “followed her into a town meeting over which the white-haired, bespectacled mayor presided, and ... turned with her and followed her out” (195). Meridian, a notorious black sheep who was ostracized and disowned because of her betrayal of the revered institution of black motherhood by leaving his first child and aborting the second, was now “followed” by the black community, a motion which demonstrated that they had not only forgiven her, but even approved of her new conception of motherhood which entailed the disruption of the preponderant sexist discourse. Thus the protagonist restored her strained ties with her community of origin only after the latter became tolerant enough to embrace differences. Meridian was well aware that “without community there is no liberation, only the most vulnerable and temporary armistice between an individual and her oppression;” however, the community “must not mean a shedding of our differences, nor the pathetic pretense that these differences do not exist” (Audre Lorde, as cited in Cardon, 2011: 177).

The second scene took place after Truman’s interracial marriage with Lynne was broken up because the Black Power Movement frowned upon any black-white relationship as a sign of one’s rejection of his ancestral African heritage. Further exacerbating the situation for the couple, their only child, Camara, was murdered in a racial hate crime. Following the homicide, both Truman and Lynne sought emotional refuge in Meridian, their surrogate mother: the protagonist “had spent a month shuttling between his [Truman’s] lovely bright studio uptown ... to Lynne’s tiny hovel downtown. Between them they had drained her dry.” Meridian’s nurturing role as a mother was evident here as she was repeatedly “pulled into bed – by Lynne, who held on to her like a child afraid of the dark – and by Truman, who almost drowned his body with her own, stuffing her flesh into his mouth as if he literally starved for her.” Even her feelings for Truman were motherly and she no longer resented her former love who had betrayed her for a white girl: “It was then that her feeling for Truman returned, but it was not sexual. It was love totally free of possessiveness or contempt. It was love that purged all thought of blame from her too accurate memory. It was forgiveness” (175).

If we view this new concept of motherhood as exclusively a female quality, it would certainly run counter to Walker’s “trans-” idea of liberation. In the dénouement of the



novel, even a formerly patriarchal figure like Truman felt “intensely maternal” (219) and voiced his willingness to replace Meridian by “performing” for other enchained blacks. While serving as a mother in Meridian’s iconoclastic rendition of the term, an individual can be as free as a F/feather in the wind and can pass this torch of freedom to everyone regardless of their societal or gender-specific roles.

### 3. Findings and Conclusion

Walker calls African Americans “the mestizos of North America” (qtd. in Duck, 2008: 463). By referring to their hybrid identity, she stresses upon the important fact that black Americans should never be considered as an isolated group detached from other racial or ethnic communities. According to the womanist writer and activist, “What is always needed in the appreciation of art, or life, is the large perspective. Connections made, or at least attempted, where none existed before, the striving to encompass in one’s glance at the varied world the common thread, the unifying thread through immense diversity” (Walker, 1999: 156).

The novel abounds with instances of animosity between different racial, ethnic and ideological groups: the racist white society murdered Truman and Lynne’s only daughter for crossing the color line; Jews lashed out at Lynne for betraying her chromatic and ethnic groups by marrying a black man; the Black Power Movement and its incarnate Truman excluded whites from their circles in a retaliatory gesture; Meridian’s mother disowned her for not abiding by the society’s assigned role as a black mother; Lynne called Truman a nigger for abandoning her after interracial marriage went out of fad; and this list of antagonistic actions and reactions in the novel can still go on.

However, the protagonist gradually managed to extricate herself from the epidemic of hate and vengefulness by constructing a new identity in which race, gender, class and other common assortments were transcended (but not erased) in favor of an inclusive mindset. In other words, Meridian step-by-step came to embrace the dialectical give-and-take between cultures, an interaction in which “seeming opposites come together to create a new possibility” and “one notion need not cancel out the other” (Wingard, 2012: 98). Meridian could surpass her melancholic



attachment to the tradition of black motherhood only when she found out that there was no unified past (and no unified homogenous notion of motherhood) and implemented this knowledge by forging interracial, trans-gender and trans-generational bonding. As a doubly marginalized hybrid, Meridian was “cognizant of the multiple ways in which history has positioned individuals and social groups, differences emerging from cultural affiliations, political orientations and psychological or spiritual traits that must be taken seriously” (Duck, 2008: 459).

At the end of the story, Meridian rejected death and embraced the life force “when she is able to see her connection to her people” (Hendrickson, 1999: 115) and significantly, to all other peoples. Far from “the extremes of conformity and individualism,” Meridian’s intercultural “coalition building” served as a roadmap of both sociopolitical and personal transformation for minorities (Cardon, 2011: 160-161). Though there was still a long way ahead, Meridian had started to repair the hoop: “The solution for Meridian is not simply to reject the cultural images of African-American women, nor to sacrifice herself to them as a revolutionary martyr. She finds a way to see them in a new critical context which no longer obscures her vision” (Barker, 1997: 476).

Although the ubiquitous spiritual presence of Native American mythology and the unique examples provided by African American foremothers, Walker tries to awaken her readers to “the bleeding of one idea or time period into another” (Wingard, 2012: 100). The novel’s spiraling narrative structure with its unending flashbacks and flash-forwards, stream-of-consciousness episodes and employment of several focal characters can collectively be taken Walker’s techniques to alienate readers, in the Brechtian sense, and expose them to a totally different and groundbreaking lifestyle.





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