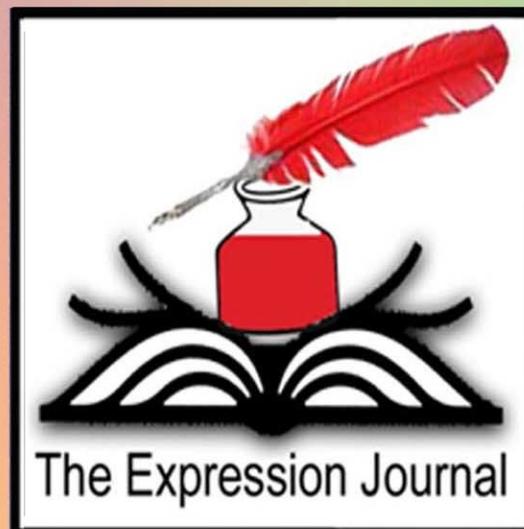


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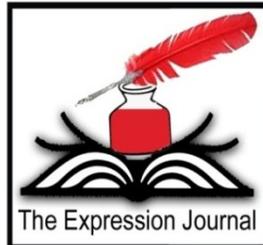
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REDIFINING BLACK WOMANHOOD IN ALICE WALKER'S MERIDIAN

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Abstract

This paper discusses on the relations between black women's past tradition and societal change and they are the crucial factors to the individual search for freedom and wholeness. It also throws light on the protagonist Meridian who got once suppressed to the maximum and her emergence as revolutionary woman at the later stage to bring changes in her families and later at the society. African American women are not ready to give up their roots, family ties and traditions however they struggle. It proves their positive attitude and thereby helps them to achieve wholeness of their community too. This discovery of the 'self' and the 'whole' is the core success of Meridian and that is the highlighted theme of this paper.

Keywords

Emergence, Renunciation, Heritage, Wholeness, Liberated, Community.

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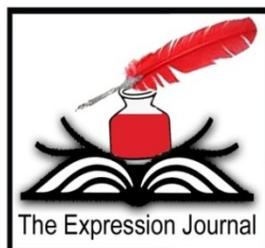
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Alice Walker is the significant black woman writer of this era to concentrate on the sensibility of the South as a way of perceiving the perennial conflict between the human spirit and the societal patterns. Her works have a therapeutic value emerging from her womanist ideology. It is continued by her aesthetic sensibility and this helps one to understand the various means employed by her characters to attain a sense of harmony and spiritual equilibrium. Walker has been a womanist on the American fictional scene for more than four decades. She prefers to call herself a womanist than a feminist. She is one of the pioneers who believes in the black womanist tenets. She feels “ Womanism appreciates and prefers “women’s culture, women’s emotional flexibility... and women’s strength” (Walker 1983:xi). Being an African-American woman, Walker has gone through the sufferings and humiliations of being doubly marginalized. Sexism in the black society and racism in the majority of white community make the damaging consequences on the blacks, especially on the black male who in turn pours out his bitterness in the form of violence on the black women and makes the black woman the worst sufferer. She probes many facets of interrelationships of sexism and racism in the American society and in her fiction she seeks to transform the ‘suspended’ women into ‘emergent’ black women.

Walker’s second novel Meridian (1976) is an examination and exploration of Meridian’s growth, her movement into womanhood and her emergence as a strong woman a motif that characterizes the novel Meridian. The novel concerns a black woman’s life as it unfolds itself for self realization and for freedom. It examines what the notion of feminine freedom means to Meridian, a black Civil Rights worker in the rapidly changing cultural climate of the 1960s and how her search for wholeness is complete when she is able to redefine her role through tradition and society. Walker constructs for her protagonist a lonely pilgrimage that encompasses elements of universal mono myth: in the form of initiation, renunciation, atonement and release. The quest

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is for self knowledge and wholeness that leads to transcendence and it is through them Meridian finally discovers herself and her relationship to the world at large.

Meridian is well organized novel into three major parts. The first part is on Meridian's initiation into adulthood and her preparation for her 'Self' journey. The second part describes Meridian's active participation in Civil Rights Movement after her renunciation of her child and the third part concentrates on her atonement and release. She is engaged in the search for selfhood by discovering meaning in her roots and traditions. She continues the struggle against the oppression of black women which Ruth dreams of. She struggles to reclaim her past and re-examines her relationship to the black community and thereby she gains internal strength to endure hardships.

Like Walker, Meridian has doors opened for her by means of a scholarship to a black women's college in Atlanta. There she finds herself immersed in the activism of the 1960s and has an abortion. From that point on, however, fact and fiction of the novel diverged. Meridian is forced into an unfulfilling marriage by the birth of an unwanted child. Like a woman herself and like woman's foremothers in her prose, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, who turned to art as an alternative to despair, Meridian eventually turns to art and succeeds in spite of her burden of guilt that she bears.

Unlike her mother, Meridian chooses her father's rationality over her mother's willing ignorance and in that process she feels that her mother's love has withdrawn from her forever.

She struggled to retain her mother's hand, covering it with her own and attempted to bring it to her lips. But her mother moved away, tears of anger and sadness coursing down her face. Her mother's love was gone, withdrawn and there were conditions to be met before it would be returned. Conditions, Meridian was never able to meet. (Meridian 30)

Walker presents a cultural context for Meridian in which motherhood becomes a vehicle for being rebellion. Her girlhood and adulthood represent periods of emotional impoverishment. She realizes too late that children are a trap; that a mother's personal life ends with the birth of her first child. Meridian knows that she has stolen her mother's serenity. She harbours thoughts of killing her child; then she contemplates suicide rather than harm her own baby. Although marriage and motherhood are negative experiences for Meridian, she attempts to transform herself at one point. Eventually, her marriage ends and she gives her child away believing that she is saving both the lives. When she renounces her child and leaves the small Mississippi town to attend a college in Atlanta, Meridian Hill begins the first journey toward wholeness.

From this point, Meridian moves through college and the Civil Right Movement into a revolutionary group where she discovers that she cannot kill herself for the revolution. When her spirit gets broken, she begins a sort of physical degeneration. She is followed by Truman Held, a man whom she sincerely loves but whom finally she must reject in an effort to get a hold of her own life. Unlike her mother and a long life of mothers before her, Meridian lives in an age of choice. She has chosen a college education over the motherhood that she faced. By putting her own son up for adoption, Meridian goes against the structure of society's definition of a woman as 'dutiful mother' and opts for college education. It may be an act with political implication. Yet Meridian's relationship with her son is vitally important to throw light on her humanity.

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After aborting Truman's baby, she is sterilized. She is haunted by having faced to win her mother's lover by the great lack of mothering and nurture and by her own failure as a mother. Her inability to forgive cripples her and at the same time, she is aware that without her choice she would have accomplished nothing. Her life would have been wasted and she would have taken out her emptiness and frustration on her baby, whom she could not love and nurture. However Meridian salvages herself from these conflicting emotions when she fights for the rights of the Chicokema children.

Walker consciously rejects death. Meridian's political commitments are not to end in martyrdom. In a flashback Walker briefly mentions Meridian's experience with a revolutionary group in New York. When they pressed to answer their question if she would kill for the Revolution, she replies like a true revolutionary that she would reject violence as the approach to change. She prefers non-violence because she is

held by something in the past: by the memory of the old black men in the South . . . and the sight of the young girls singing in the country choir, their voices the voices of angels. (Meridian 27-28)

Meridian's contribution to the Revolution will be her 'memory songs.' For it is "the song of the people, transformed by the experiences of each generation that holds them together and if any part of it is lost, the people suffer and are without soul." (Meridian 201) In order to transform their society, black people must understand their own heritage and transform themselves. It is in this process of attempting social change through the movement that Meridian discovers her own personal path.

Meridian's search for wholeness can be defined as her attempt to express the totality of self and how that self is related to the world. It is a search for freedom, joy and contentment in being a woman, a search for self love and a real yearning for a communal love. In Meridian's story one can see black women developing a consciousness and awareness, which allows them to arrive at a deepened sense of self and grow stronger by speaking from and for that self.

Meridian Hill like Janie Crawford leaves the men in her life to search for fulfillment as a human being. Meridian leaves Eddie and Truman, turns inward, and travels back through many generations to free her. She identifies her mother's great-grand mother, a slave but also an artist who became famous and bought her freedom. She also expresses deep sensitivity for her own mother who, through suffering and sacrifice, fulfilled her dreams of becoming a school teacher. Such an anchor in her ancestral pasts gives Meridian a sense of strength and continuity, knowledge of herself as a creative human being and in turn it helps to fortify and to free her from a need for dependence on another person in her quest for identity. When Truman, asks Meridian if her love for him is changed, her response "No, I set you free . . ." (Meridian 216) shows that she has released herself from the sexual bonds and she intends to pursue her own 'wholeness'. Her ties are not with a man, a family or with the specific community. She prefers motherhood for her which includes not only rearing of children but nurturing life, the continuity of life. She sees her existence as inseparable from all black people and writes:

There is water in the world for us
Brought by our friends though the rock of mother and god

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Vanishes into sand
And we, cast out alone
To heal
And re-create
Ourselves, (p.213)

On the whole Meridian embraces her black heritage, her woman's heritage and reaches out to her people. The journey of self discovery is a lonely one but Meridian undertakes it with fortitude and dignity and hence she becomes the mother of her black community. In spite of Meridian's painful private experiences, she is born a new and succeeds in evolving a new self and in due course of time, she emerges as a leader of the black race, Now she is a liberated black woman, who knows what she should take from the past to create a new future. Meridian's incorporation into the community is, in essence, a new birth into spiritual wholeness. This finding of selfhood actually helps her to reach greater heights as well. Perhaps going towards womanhood takes Meridian to another level from where she looks at the black women as a savior and works for their well being. The researcher feels that Meridian creates a new self - an androgynous self which undoubtedly leads her to the right path and thus she is able to redefine wholeness of the black community.

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