

## Denying Motherhood in Walker's Meridian

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### Abstract

Meridian, the victim of racism in the white society, gets suppressed by the whole patriarchal community. However, she gradually awakens from her subordinate status as a black female, daughter, wife and mother. Meridian experiences motherhood at her early age and considers it as slavery. Her inability to enjoy her motherhood creates a sense of guilt and leads her to renounce her child and she sets out in search of her self identity. Meridian joins the Civil Rights Movement and becomes the maternal provider for all black community.

**KEYWORDS:** Suppression, Subordinate, Motherhood, Self Identity.

The mother figure in African American communities is greatly respected because the very lineage of 'Black' in the United States is determined by the status of the mother. During the period of American slavery, if a woman is black her child will be thrown into slavery. Because of slavery, African American motherhood becomes a battle ground for racist and sexist ideologies. Slave women were valued for their capacity to breed and to bring up their children until they become the producers of the society. Slave families were often separated and the mother should sacrifice everything and this has become the norms of African American communities.

Meridian portrays the life of a young, pure, saintly black woman Meridian, who presents her search for selfhood against the background of rapid socio-cultural changes of the 1960s. She is a Civil Rights Worker, who comes forward to perceive the true meaning of freedom. She redefines her role which has been imposed on her by the patriarchal and racist society. Al- Kadery states, "Walker's women undertakes radical swerves for the purpose of redefining the self and the role" (26). Meridian undergoes a process of transformation along with the changes that come in the society. She rejects the temptations of a conventional middle class life, the conventional woman's role of a dutiful daughter, wife, mother and mistress. This, she does in order to live on her own foot.

Meridian makes a journey from powerlessness to empowerment and from a docile submissive black girl to a fighter and a pioneer of black women's liberation. She celebrates her capacity, will power and her own existence by registering a protest against

every kind of exploitation and anarchy. Meridian finds the spirit of racism in her motherhood, in which a mother should sacrifice everything as the norms of African American community. Meridian is subjugated under the memory of the slaves who have to starve themselves to death, to feed their children. Sometimes black women deny their maternal history. To illustrate the point, Marriage between Mr. and Mrs. Hill is a wrong choice. Mrs Hill conceives believing that this will add sunshine to her personal life. Contrary to her expectation motherhood becomes a burden because it represents the loss of her own self and teaching position. As Mrs. Hill's marriage is a loveless one, the relationship between Meridian and Mrs. Hill is not that of a lovable mother daughter relationship. Walker dramatizes the changes that affect Meridian's psyche and her life. Although Mrs. Hill has not been given information about her restriction of motherhood, she and her daughter are told about its glory. She makes her daughter realize that her mother's life is stolen. Mrs. Hill never discusses marriage or motherhood with her daughter. So when Meridian sees her mother's history with motherhood, she becomes unable to repeat the same experience.

When Meridian was twelve and fifteen, she was exposed to married life. She always remembered her early days in the funeral home, when the owner of the house, George Daxter would give her candy and money to abuse her. This insists the racial patriarchal society, where man places superiority to get hold of the woman. Her physical experience with her husband Eddie, an attractive high school basket ball player is linked in her mind with those earlier experiences at the funeral home. So the birth of their son sounded as an alarm to the end of her married life. She links the child with slavery and dreams of the ways to kill him. The spirit of racism never allows the mothers to be happy with their children.

The thought of her inability to enjoy or endure the inconveniences of happy motherhood, frightens her and creates a sense of guilt in her. It leads her to entertain the thoughts of committing suicide. She feels that to live merely as someone's wife means self-effacement which she with her sense of freedom cannot ever accept. Meridian sees marriage as a sanctuary, something which has cut her off from the world outside. Here Walker dismantles the image of woman as the submissive wife and along with it the romantic stereotype of marriage as made in heaven. Meridian feels the need to exist because as a black woman, she is doubly enslaved by race and sex. According to her, maternal sacrifice is another form of "racist slavery" (72). As Sengupta mentions, "Afro-American motherhood, is traditionally viewed as a vehicle for preserving black heritage in the face of white cultural domination" (106). Tradition imposes motherhood on a woman and encourages her self- sacrifice for the sake of her family and society. After much inner conflict she renounces her child and sets out alone in search of her self-identity and social justice for her people.

Meridian evolves from a woman oppressed by racial and sexual prejudice to an active revolutionary figure who brings freedom to herself and to other poor tormented blacks in the south. Every effort of Meridian leads her towards celebration, as Sharma points out, "Celebration is not the only name of triumph or achieving the destination, but to enjoy every effort and to face every pain bravely" (147). Meridan's quest for wholeness of the entire black community and her involvement in the Civil Rights Movement is initiated by

her feelings of inadequacy in living up to the standards of black motherhood. She understands what it is to be a mother by knowing her own mother and then again by becoming the mother of Eddie's child. Giving up of Eddie's child depicts Meridian's ultimate liberation from the bondage of race and motherhood. Simultaneously she feels guilty for her failure to reach, "the standard of motherhood that had gone before"(91). Her quest for motherhood finally turns to a concern for the survival and wholeness of the entire black community.

Meridian often realizes that, "She is responsible for shattering her mother's emerging self" (51) during her childhood. The feeling that she has been a part of her mother's slavery coincides with her own feelings as a young mother. From this Meridian realizes that a mother in the society is often, "buried alive, walled away from her own life, brick by brick" (51). When Meridian says no to motherhood, she offends and loses her own mother, her family and her community. Das states, "Black women struggle to survive in the horror of racism" (36), but Meridian stops living according to the norms established by racial and sexual society and learns to discover her own identity as she must in order to survive. More powerfully Meridian awakens to her true self and learns about Civil Rights Movement. She joins that movement in order to continue her fight for social justice and for the rights of all black women.

Meridian's participation in Civil Rights Movement is the part of her celebration of the tolerating power potentialities of the blacks and an effort to launch her journey in order to build up her own horizon. Her work in the Civil Rights Movement makes her well familiar with the world and it offers her the opportunity to become involved with Truman Held, a black revolutionist, once the passionate lover of Meridian who later turns to be the lover of a white girl, Lynne Rabinowitz.

Meridian develops an affair with Truman and she conceives a child. As she is rejected by her lover, she again discards her motherhood. As he feels free to leave Meridian without explanation, she feels no obligation to tell him of the child, she decides to abort her child. As Pifer utters:

Abortion, in and of itself, does not automatically create freedom.

But it does not allow women to exert some control over our biology,

Freeing us from the inevitability of unwanted pregnancies and

therefore indispensable to bodily and political self determination. (91)

Once freed from the possibilities of unwanted pregnancies and the sexual advances of men around her, Meridian acts as a protector of all the children whom she encounters in the Movement. She defends for the right of black children to satisfy their curiosity. Meridian undergoes personal sacrifice for the welfare of her society to enact a meaningful life.

Being a woman in the racist society, the mother characters in the novel can lead their life independently without the help of man. Mrs. Hill remained unhappy and accepts the traditional role of being a mother, where Meridian and Lynne being the victims of racist

society tackle it by joining together. The black motherhood transforms Meridian from a victim to a fighter. Walker concludes with a celebration of life and transformation of Meridian in a new incarnation as a woman, who loves embraces and salutes life, which is provided by the supreme power to the human beings.

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