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## Images of Motherhood in African-American Literature - A Focus on Alice Walker's *Meridian*

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### Images of Mother in Life and Literature

“Motherhood”, is one of the dominant postmodern feminist themes which the writers like to highlight. A study of the images of mother in life and literature is the major concern of modern

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women writers. Motherhood is the core human relationship in a family. African-American mother has found motherhood as a source of strength in emotional fulfillment and a strong sense of bonding.

One of the important roles of the woman in her family is her role as a mother. The mother begets and brings up the new born child and involves herself in building up the basic personality of the child. This makes the mother “the preserver and builder of the new generation” (Sashi Jain 145)”. The mother has the capacity to install old values and tradition to the new generation thereby providing a strong cultural base for the young generation. Great honor and prestige is obtained by a woman as a mother for motherhood is the cherished ideal.

### **Description of African-American Mothers**

The African- American women were designated as “Mammy”, “Matriarch”, “Mamma”, “Superwoman.” The women authors work toward dismantling traditional stereotypes of Black Motherhood, particularly the Black superwoman stereotype, and, thereby, ultimately redefining Black womanhood. Alice Walker *In her search for mother’s Gardens* says “black women are called, in the folklore that so aptly identifies one’s status in society, “the mule of the world,” because we have been handed the burdens that everyone else—*everyone* else—refused to carry. We have also been called “Matriarchs,” “Superwomen, “and “Mean and Evil Bitches.” Not to mention “Castrates” and “Sapphire’s Mama. (237)”.

### **Women Victims**

In African-American culture during her slave past she is thought to keep the family in order. She is strong representing the power of a work horse, invulnerable to diseases. She does all the households chores, as washerwomen, wet nurse, and does her domestic work. She looks after the toddlers in the white master’s house. The women were victims to the white masters who often violated her sexually. The white masters were attracted towards her for she was believed to be strong and sexual and nothing would deter her strength. The male unable to guard his wife often manhandles her. So she was not only the object of her white master but also the men of her race as well. So the African- American turns to her children for emotional support and fulfillment. There is lack of communication between her and her husband who shows his anger and frustration to her.

### **Concern with the Status of Women in the Family and in the World**

African-American women writers are concerned with the position of women in their family and her social status in the world at large. The African- American woman in spite of facing problems in life like unequal status derives satisfaction in one aspect of life which is motherhood. This helps her to face struggles in life and emerge from their stereotype roles to assert their individual self. The black Madonna image has disappeared from Africa she is no longer recognized as field mother or earth mother still she remains an epitome of motherhood.

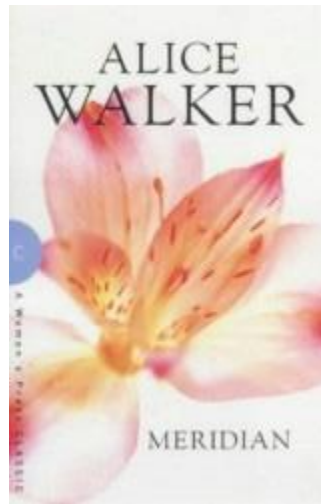
A dilemma that is often faced by her is to choose between work and motherhood.

### **Alice Walker's Strategy**

Alice Walker's history and heritage provide a vehicle for understanding the modern world in which her characters live. Walker focuses on the element of *Bildungsroman*, the development of the protagonist from childhood, growth and maturity. African- American women move away from her slave past and through her experiences she becomes an individual emancipated from stereotypical roles. Alice Walker is regarded as a writer of powerful expressive fiction. Her works are concerned with racial, political, sexual and moral issues particularly with the African- American women's struggle for spiritual and the concept of survival.

Her works include *The Color Purple* (1982), *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970), *Meridian* (1976), *Love and Trouble* (1973) which is an excellent collection of short stories. Her one more collection *You Can't keep a Good woman Down* (1982) brings forth the resilience of African- American in facing racial, sexual and economic oppression. *The Temple of My Familiar* (1989) and *Possessing the Secret Joy* (1992) are her recent novels with postmodernist themes.

### **The Protagonist in *Meridian***



In Walker's second novel *Meridian*, the protagonist deprives her blood relations, her son, and her husband to commit herself entirely to a large group of oppressed class. She joins the activist's blacks. She evolves a positive role by rejecting tradition and waits for her disciple Truman Held and other social groups to follow her.

Walker focuses on the female Bildungsroman of her titular heroine Meridian who is a civil rights worker. The narrative is solidly constructed and makes use of symbols, flashbacks, anecdotes and retrospective narration. Christine Gomez in her paper "*Alice Walker's Meridian as a Feminist Bildungsroman*" opines that "The novel deals with the theme of self-discovery, self-

definition, and self affirmation. Meridian's earliest memories, her relationship with her parents, maternal history, and ancestral legacy of traits, initiation into sex, entrapment into motherhood out of ignorance and in marriage and the disintegration of it are presented."(254)

### **A Triangular Relationship**

The story progresses with the young southern black woman Meridian and the choices she makes between marriage, motherhood and education. It presents her role in the Civil Rights Movement and her final resolve to place herself with the poor southern blacks. She believes in staunch violent protests. Meridian forms a triangular relationship with Truman Held, a fellow civil rights worker and a white woman Lynne Rabinowitz. Lynne and Truman get married and Meridian establishes a positive self image.

### **Oppression of the Maternal Role**

The maternal role is oppressed by Meridian. She faces a lot of struggle to relinquish her individual motherhood and opts for universal motherhood. She gains a free access to the world of education and politics by extricating from her private domestic affairs. Meridian drops out of school due to her early marriage with a restaurant bus boy, Eddie. She bears him a son. Eddie leaves her. She gives her son for adoption and joins college. She braves the ridicule of the towns' people and the women of her community. Being a teen aged mother she is faced with varied impulses. Her pregnancy comes as a shock to her. She was so ignorantly brought up by her pious mother Mrs. Hill. She almost lost the ability to think and feels almost all her vital energies were expended by her wed lock. "She was so exhausted that it was futile to attempt to think straight or even to think at all"(69).

### **Consequences of the Loss of Selfhood**

Meridian felt the loss of selfhood and frustrated ambitions on the birth of her son. The thought of devoting her whole self for child care brings resentment to her. Her husband only makes an occasional visit to her house. In isolation desperate thoughts haunt her; she therefore meditates on suicide and murdering her infant. Walker gives nauseating pictures of Meridian's hysterical mind. While tending and caressing her child's body imagines of scraping the flesh of the child from his bones with her finger nails. (69-72) This reveals the post-modern concept of Paranoia often discussed by the authors.

The tensions of suicide and murder exhaust her and calm her that she is called an 'exemplary young mother'. She read many novels and magazines which presented the stereotypical images of womanhood. "According to these magazines woman was a mindless body, a sex creature, something to hang false hair and nails on" (71).Meridian lethargically conforms to these stereotypes reaching the dead end by the age of seventeen. Her singularity is shown when she carries her child in her hand with wonder and amazement and contemplates it as an unasked- for gift. Though she considered looking after her son as slavery she soon realized that he was more helpless than her. She could not renounce her son totally as seen in her direction to change his

name to Rundi meaning 'after no person'. She is not separating her son from herself but from someone unknown.

### **A College Candidate**

Meridian's IQ makes her a college candidate. She felt that in order to survive she has to sacrifice something. So she gives her son for adoption against her will and the women of her community in order to get a higher education. She needs to survive and felt she could not support her son without her husband who has abandoned her. The guilt ridden psyche torments her for she thinks of the times of slavery where women were not allowed to keep their own children. Freedom was a heaven sent boon to them for they could keep their own children. The whole community did not appreciate her act. Her mother Mrs. Hill was outraged at the sacrilegious act of her daughter, and tells the plight of the black mother 'walled away from her own life brick by brick' (51) with the birth of each successive child.

### **Black Women Writing the American Experience**

Susan Willis, in her *Specifying: Black Women Writing the American Experience* is of the opinion that by relinquishing her child she gains self affirmation for a black woman considers as an insurmountable obstacle. She carves out a new social function by for herself by refusing ever to be a mother to a particular child, but opts for mothering in a broader sense, by caring for the community. (123). She joins Saxon College. There she realizes the struggle her mother would have undergone, is able to understand and view herself in the perspective of black motherhood. Meridian pays the price for giving the child for adoption. She gets nightmares of her child.

Despite feverish cramming and throwing herself into all sorts of activities she is able to hear the voice of her child crying out her name. She feels she has broken the maternal history of her race, which was one of care and devotion to its children. Her slave ancestor had starved to feed her children and even Meridian's grandmother had toiled hard to educate her mother. She gets migraines and was unable to concentrate. She stammers. She thought otherwise. Had she stayed with her mother-in-law to look after her child by doing some menial jobs her and her son's life would have become a total waste. She wants to become empowered.

### **Civil Rights**

Meridian comes across another Civil Rights worker Truman Held. Both of them fall in love and Meridian is impregnated. She found him to be fickle minded when he courts a white woman Lynne Rabinowitz leaving her. She hates men and rejects them once for all when she undergoes a brutal abortion. She screams at the abortionist when he suggests tying her tubes saying "Burn them down by the roots for all I care" (115). When Truman comes and asks her to marry her and have his black babies, the rage gets the better of her and slaps him drawing blood from his temples. She proves that she is a person and not merely a sex creature to beget and bring forth his babies. Later she forgives him and befriends Lynne and him when they get married. This triangular friendship proceeds till the end of the novel.

## Becoming a Universal Mother

Rejecting individual motherhood once and for ever she becomes a universal mother to the whole black children She joins civil rights activists desperately tries to save the children of Alabama. The main sources of Meridian's progressive actions were children, who have become her life blood. She carries the rotting corpse of a child trapped in an over flooded ditch. Even its mother refused to touch the putrefying corpse. The problems faced by people in the ghettos are brought by her to the Mayor of the town. Her courage, her individuality, her ability to grapple with the problems of others is excellently portrayed. When Truman and Lynne's daughter Camara was raped and killed she mourns with as much sorrow as that of a mother, consoling them.

Meridian, though she becomes sick recovers with a mental strength and fortitude to serve her community.

## The Female Bildungsroman

The female Bildungsroman is carefully built in the novel to show the process of growth and maturity of the protagonist in the novel. The novel *Meridian* employs flash back techniques and brings out the various myths of black motherhood. When the novel opens she leads a band of black children in protest against the leaders of Chicokema. She protests against the mummified corpse of Marilene O' Shay' that is placed for exhibition. The banners proclaim the three phrases 'Obedient Daughter' 'Devoted Wife' and 'Adoring Mother' which depict the stereotype images imposed on by women. Not only is the heroine's motherhood accomplished but the theme is highlighted through various legendary, anecdotal and metaphorical characters in the role of mothers.

## Women as Active Agents of Rational Choice

Alice Walker presents woman as an active agent capable of rational choice, neither selfish nor selfless, who discovers her own individual role in life. It depicts a woman whose primary aim in life is not only marriage and motherhood in particular, a woman who has a conscious moral choice to be an individual. Meridian Hill fights with her emotions, rejects the stereotypical roles imposed on society, commits her whole heartedly to serve her community. She braves all impediments and the people love her for her dedication. Walker makes us understand that Meridian has mastered the whole struggle by involving herself in the struggle.

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