CHAPTER III

Meridian:
Feminine Dialect of the Tribe
Alice Walker’s second novel *Meridian* recounts the valiant life of a Civil Rights worker, Meridian Hill. The novel is about a black woman’s struggle for self-realization and freedom. It also examines the question of feminine freedom. Meridian Hill, the heroine of the novel, is the embodiment of Black American spiritual continuity and consciousness. Through her Walker explores the processes of personal and social growth leading to the evolution of a strong and independent woman.

Discussing her novel with Claudia Tate, Walker says that her work resembles something like a “crazy-quilt”: “A crazy-quilt story is one that can jump back and forth in time, work on many different levels, and one that can include myth.” *Meridian* is not written in a proper chronological structure. The novel depends on the active participation of the reader. Form becomes a signifier of a new consciousness. The reader finds no chapters as such, but is confronted with mere descriptions of episodes: “The Last Return”, “Have You Stolen Anything,” “The Wild Child,” “The New York Times.” These episodes are generally not governed by any strict chronology and it would be possible to alter the structure without affecting the meaning of the text. One episode in the novel, “The Recurring Dream,” assumes a metaphysical aspect. “She dreamed she was a character in a novel and that her existence presented an insoluble problem, one that would be solved only by her death at the end. Even when she gave up reading novels that encouraged such a solution -- and nearly all of them did -- the dream did not cease.” This literary consciousness abruptly moves the narrative away from reality and draws attention to the textual process. By
repeating the "she dreamed" sequences, coherent representation ceases and narrative development stops; the reader must construct meaning. This strategy is one of many that mark the narrative's attempt to disrupt coherence, to declare its polysemous character, and force the reader to construct meaning. Further indications of this occur in the fusion of genres. The mythological story of the Wild Child and the Sojourner tree is placed within the framework of a narrative grounded in realism. This total disregard for chronology renders the passage of time at best a secondary concern. The shift in narrative focus, while always mediated by an external narrator, is never in the strict sense polyphonic. The passage from one episode to another, one situation to another, forces the reader to re-evaluate his or her position constantly.

Meridian Hill, the heroine of the novel, is educated and is a woman of the sixties. She is an extension of Ruth of The Third Life of Grange Copeland who symbolizes some ray of hope. Meridian is dedicated to securing freedom for her people. But her life too does not run smooth. She struggles throughout the novel. She is indeed quite aware of the fact that she is Black and American. But she refuses to shed her Africanness. Meridian suffers from the double-consciousness syndrome.

According to Mary Helen Washington, this crisis "creates its own particular kind of disfigurement in the lives of Black women, and ... far more than the external facts and figures of oppression, the true terror is within; the mutilation of the spirit and the body." Meridian struggles to find her identity. "Hers is a formidable struggle, for she lives in a society that domesticates conformity, that censures individual expression, especially for women; but she flourishes notwithstanding and evolves
into a prototype for psychic wholeness and individual autonomy." Barbara Christian writes that the main struggle in *Meridian* is that between a natural, life-driven spirit and society's deadly strictures: ... "though the concept of One Life motivates Meridian in her quest toward physical and spiritual health, the societal evils that subordinate one class to another, one race to another, one sex to another, fragment and ultimately threaten life. The novel *Meridian* ... is built on the tension between the African concept of animism, 'that spirit that inhabits all life,' and the societal forces that inhabit the growth of the living toward their natural state of freedom." Meridian's struggle is in a way symbolic. "Her struggle," says Walker, "is the struggle each one of us will have to assume in our own way."

Apart from expressing their preoccupation with the themes related to race and gender, Black women writers try to reveal in their works what it means to be human. It is a condition which comprises conscious volition. Black women, being both black and female, try to project their vision of life, the world, society, community, family, and even themselves, mostly through the eyes of their black female characters. "Black women continue to talk about intimate relationships so that we can recognize what is happening when we see it, then maybe there will be some change in behavior on the part of men and women."

Stating the differences and the similarities between Morrison’s *Sula* and Walker’s *Meridian*, Gloria Wade-Gayles writes that both the novels are about the human need for wholeness. *Meridian* is a young, pure, saintly woman of the South who has functioned in the roles of wife and mother. *Sula* is on the other hand is an "evil" and defiant woman of the Midwest who has been neither wife nor mother.
What is common between Sula and Meridian is the intense desire to give birth to themselves as persons. Their individual quests for selfhood are precipitated by different personal needs and they reflect different attitudes toward the human condition. The stages of their journeys toward selfhood and the people they love and leave along the way are, therefore, decidedly different. Both the goals of their quests are the same — a clearer understanding of self and an expanded room in which to hum their own melodies and sing their own lyrics. Meridian is a child of the soil — pure, innocent, and loving. Like Sula, however, she is forced into “premature adulthood by the donnee of her life” and she grows into a strong and independent woman. She begins her journey under circumstances that are antithetical to those governing Sula.

Meridian is a child of the race whose mind and vision of life are shaped by the collective consciousness of her people. Sula is more about sexual consciousness than about racial struggle. In spite of these differences, however, Sula and Meridian are very similar because both are stories of black women who will not be restricted to narrow definitions of themselves as women.

Meridian is born and brought up in an intact family. Her father, being a local school teacher, is a loving and caring personality, quite contrary to Walker’s traditional image of a father. “He was a dreamy, unambitious person ... who walked over the earth unhurriedly, as if conscious of every step and the print his footsteps would leave in the dirt” (40). Meridian’s mother too is educated. She is a conventional woman with a weak personality. She had spent her childhood days scurrying out of her father’s way and later scurrying out of the way of white men. After her marriage
to the person she loved, she realises to her dismay that she has been trapped by the myth of marriage and motherhood. She feels that “She could never forgive her community, her family, his family, the whole world, for not warning her against children” (40). She soon discovers, much to her horror and amazement, that her personal life was over. Consumed by resentment, she realises that, “The mysterious inner life that she had imagined which gave them a secret joy was simply a full knowledge of the fact that they were dead, living just enough for their children” (40). Engulfed by her personal feelings, she fails to love her children, and tends to their physical needs ignoring their emotional needs. Mrs. Hill feels that she is “being buried alive, walled away from her own life, brick by brick” (41). Her repressed anger and rage is redirected into fulfilling the physical needs of her children. When Meridian hears her mother talk about her childhood memories, she weeps and wishes with all her heart that it would have been better if “she had not been born to this already overburdened woman” (123). She constantly struggles to resolve a guilt, a vague guilt, whose origin she could not identify. She fails to trace what she might be guilty of. Meridian even tries to know from her mother whose ideas never went beyond the tangible things. She would in turn ask Meridian “Have you stolen anything?” (41). Although it was irrational on the part of Meridian to think so, she always felt guilty for stealing her mother’s serenity and for shattering her mother’s emerging self.

Many African slave women found outlets for their stifled creativity by decorating their homes, raising up gardens, and by quilt-making. Meridian’s mother too could have found an outlet. Though, “Creativity was in her, but it was refused
expression.” “She never learned to cook well, she never learned to braid hair prettily or to be in any other way creative in her home. She could have done so, if she had wanted to.” Mrs. Hill did of course “learned to make paper flowers and prayer pillows from tiny scraps of cloth” (41). But they were of no use to anyone.

Meridian, unaware of her physical vulnerability and further on account of lack of proper information which she could not get from her mother, becomes pregnant at an early age. Her pregnancy comes as a total shock to her. She marries her lover and settles down trying to fit into her new role as a wife, mother, and daughter-in-law. She is forced to leave her studies. Pregnancy is altogether a negative experience for her. She feels she is trapped in the institution of motherhood. She experiences a similar kind of feelings like her mother: “She knew she did not want it. Yet she was having it, of course. She grew and grew and grew, as pregnant women will. Her skin, always smooth as velvet, became blotchy, her features blunted; her face looked bloated, tight” (56). The arrival of the baby creates nothing but anger, hatred, and frustration. Meridian feels exhausted while caring and attending the child, for she fails even to think straight: “It took everything she had to tend the child, and she had to do it, her body prompted not by her own desires, but by her son’s cries. So this, she mumbled, lurching toward his crib in the middle of the night, is what slavery is like. Rebelling, she began to dream each night, just before her baby sent out his cries, of ways to murder him” (63). She feels that he was nothing but a “ball and chain” to her. In order to suppress this heinous idea of murdering her own child, she starts thinking of ways and means of killing herself. She actually lives her way out with the continuous “growing reliance on suicide” (64).
Ironically, she is praised by all her neighbouring women for her calm and mature composure while her mind was struggling to attain peace. Finally Meridian gives up her child, leaves her husband, and packs off to attend college in Atlanta. Thus she begins her first journey toward wholeness. “Meridian’s quest for wholeness and her involvement in the Civil Rights Movement is initiated by her feelings of inadequacy in living up to the standards of Black Motherhood.” In the novel Walker scrutinizes the tradition which is based on the monumental myth of Black motherhood. Meridian does not live up to the standards of Black motherhood. Black women sacrificed their lives for their children.

Meridian goes much against her mother’s warnings. Mrs. Hill feels that only monsters could possibly do such mean and heartless things. She feels that it is a matter of sheer selfishness to let another woman raise Meridian’s child. Her’s was a family in which mothers sacrificed their lives for the sake of their children. Her mother had bargained with her father to allow her to go to school. Mrs. Hill’s mother had to take up washing other people’s clothes to meet the expenses of her daughter. Mrs. Hill’s great grandmother died of slow starvation in her attempt to bring up her children. Although Meridian sees her mother as Black motherhood personified, she goes much in opposition to her. Barbara Christian writes of the danger of the myth of Black motherhood thus: “... that tradition that is based on the monumental myth of black motherhood, a myth based on the true stories of sacrifice black mothers performed for their children... is ... restrictive, for it imposes a stereotype of Black women, a stereotype of strength that denies them choice and hardly admits of the many who were destroyed.”
Meridian lives in an age of choice and does not allow her ambitions or desires to be choked. She feels that "her mother's and grandmother's extreme purity of life was compelled by necessity. They had not lived in an age of choice" (123). Her mother, for instance, manages to conform to tradition by suppressing her own emotions. Barbara Christian writes that Walker works with traditional and feminist perspectives on motherhood attempting a compromise that would allow her protagonist to live:

As many radical feminists blamed motherhood for the waste in women's lives and saw it as a dead end for a woman, Walker insisted on a deeper analysis: she did not present motherhood in itself as restrictive. It is so because of the little value society places on children, especially Black children, on mothers, especially Black mothers, on life itself. In the novel, Walker acknowledged that a mother in this society is often "buried alive, walled away from her own life, brick by brick." Yet the novel is based on Meridian's insistence on the sacredness of life.

Meridian rejects the role of the mythical Black mother. She does not object to children or mothers bearing children, but she resents the role a woman is expected to play once she becomes a mother. Although she thinks that her giving up her child, is right, at a deeper level she feels condemned, consigned to penitence for life. She begins to have nightmares. Subconsciously she begins to despise herself. She thinks of "her mother as being worthy of this maternal history, and of herself as belonging to an unworthy minority" (87). Her own voice begins to curse her very existence. She feels she has abandoned her son and her own heritage: "Meridian knew that enslaved women ... 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. And what had Meridian Hill done with her precious child? She had given him away" (87). Meridian
experiences a kind of spiritual degeneration within herself. She begins to have headaches and would stutter as she spoke. She would dream of terrible things but still she thinks herself to be extremely fortunate in getting an opportunity to attend Saxon College which had an excellent social and academic reputation.

Meridian's admission to Saxon college provides for her an escape from guilt, the guilt of having failed to be an obedient daughter and a loving mother. In Saxon College she had to deny her marriage, her divorce and motherhood, for, "It was assumed that Saxon young ladies were, by definition, virgins" (90). Meridian struggles to give some meaning to her life. She feels that her life as an individual is being wasted. She longs to do something to the society. Provoked by the violence of the bomb blast, she becomes a volunteer. As a volunteer, she gets beaten by the police. Meridian bears all their beatings silently. She also does some service-oriented jobs like typing, teaching the illiterates to read and to write. Her active participation in the Civil Rights Movement helps her to go back to school once again.

The women at Saxon College were expected to be as pure as the driven snow, as the school song proclaims. Every morning one girl is expected to give her witness of how she had overcome temptation and turned towards God. Meridian becomes very friendly with Anne Marion, collegemate and associate in her struggle. Both of them get involved in the Civil Rights Movement. Although they both worked together for a brief period, they differ very much in their attitudes toward their achievements. "While Meridian was thin and seemed to contain the essence of silence, … Anne-Marion, was rounded and lush, brash and eager to argue over the smallest
issues. Her temper was easily lost" (27). "Anne Marion wanted black to have the same opportunity to make as much money as the richest white people. But Meridian wanted the destruction of the rich as a class and the eradication of all personal economic preserves" (116).

Walker distinguishes between faddism and real genuine devotion to the struggle. Meridian is truly concerned about her people. She is never carried away by the frantic violent emotions:

(She) was holding on to something the others had let go. ...she felt herself to be, not holding on to something from the past, but held by something in the past: by the memory of old black men in the South who, caught by surprise in the eye of a camera, never shifted their position but looked directly back; by the sight of young girls singing in a country choir, their hair shining with brushings and grease, their voices the voices of angels. When she was transformed in church it was always by the purity of the singers’ souls, which she could actually hear, the purity that lifted their songs like a flight of doves above her music-drunkened head. If they committed murder -- and to her even revolutionary murder was murder -- what would the music be like? (14-15)

Although non-violence has failed, Meridian is held by the unrevolutionary past, that past which rejected violence as an approach to change, the past which has been rooted in love, the culture and the music of her people. Meridian chooses life-giving rather than life-destroying means of supporting the revolution. Karen Stein writes about Walker’s approach thus:

... the novel points out that the Civil Rights Movement often reflected the oppressiveness of patriarchal capitalism. Activists merely turned political rhetoric to their own ends while continuing to repress spontaneous individuality. To overcome this destructiveness, Walker reaches for a new definition of revolution. Her hope for a just society inheres not merely in political change, but in personal transformation
Walker posits Meridian’s struggle for personal transformation as an alternative to the political movements of the sixties. The transformation Walker insists on is possible not through violence but through a spiritual awakening.

Meridian’s life in Saxon College gives her an opportunity in indulge in the struggle. Although all the rules of Saxon College like prohibition on “smoking, drinking, speaking loudly, going off the campus without an escort, remaining off campus after six, talking to boys before visiting hours, remained in effect” (91) the administration of the college neither condoned nor discouraged their students’ participation in the Atlanta Movement. “The emphasis at Saxon was on form, and the preferred “form” was that of the finishing school girl whose goal, wherever she would later find herself in the world, was to be accepted as an equal because she knew and practiced all the proper social rules” (91). One could do anything as long as it was done with white gloves. “In fact, Meridian and the other students felt they had two enemies: Saxon, which wanted them to become something -- ladies -- that was already obsolete, and the larger, more deadly enemy, white racist society” (91).

Meridian witnesses real life in the streets of Atlanta. She hears about a young girl “Wild Child” who lived in absolute filth and debris. When Meridian actually sees this abandoned girl she is deeply moved and withdraws into her room. There she meditates “lying like a corpse on the floor beside her bed, eyes closed and hands limp at her sides” (24) responding to nothing, not even to lunch or phone call or anything. When Meridian learns that Wild Child is pregnant, she tries to bring her under her fold. But Wild Child being more slippery than a “greased pig,” it was
virtually impossible to catch her. Meridian, baiting with glass beads and cigarettes, captures “Wile Chile” and takes her to the campus. She bathes her, feeds and keeps her in the honors house. But Meridian could not keep the girl for long for she was persuaded by the house mother to send her away. She could not get immediate accommodation for Wile Chile as none of the schools and homes accepted her. Wild Child escapes from the campus and gets killed, struck by a car. Although “Meridian and the Wild Child do not share a common social ground, they come together on one point, and that is the possibility of being made pregnant. For both of them conception stands for oppression.”

The Wild Child’s story reveals “how alone woman is, because of her body.”

Walker has been greatly influenced by the works of Jean Toomer and Zora Neale Hurston. Their works have influenced her intellectual and artistic development. Like Toomer and Hurston, Walker is also a writer of the South. Meridian bears the imprint of both Cane and Their Eyes Were Watching God. Both Toomer and Walker share a deep interest in the spirituality of the African-American women. Like Cane, Meridian is a collection of largely prose narratives of variable length. Meridian, like Karintha, the heroine in the first section of Cane, is completely unprepared to bring up her son. She possesses great strength of soul and imagination like Carrie K. She resembles Avey, the prostitute, in struggling her way out which is marked by alienation and aimlessness. Unlike these women whose lives are at a standstill and who fail to have any kind of fulfilment and desired sense of resolution, Meridian eventually finds a direction, a purpose and fulfilment in her personal as well as political life.
Walker's fiction can be profitably compared to that of Hurston. Both of them share a similar feeling, a deep regard for and appreciation of the value of African-American folk culture. Hurston’s novel laid a foundation not only for Walker’s exploration of the sexuality of African-American women, but also for her exploration of the institution of marriage and motherhood. Hurston’s metaphor for the sexuality of African-American women is the ‘pear tree,’ but in Meridian, it is a large magnolia tree which emerges from a dark and brutal history. “There was, in the center of the campus, the largest magnolia tree in the country. It was called The Sojourner. The Sojourner had been planted by a slave on the Saxon plantation -- later, of course, Saxon College. The slave’s name was Louvinie” (31). It was known that the slave girl’s tongue was clipped for no mistake of hers. She had unintentionally frightened her master’s son to death with a tale he and his sister had requested. The slave girl buried her tongue under the magnolia tree and people claim that the tree possessed magical powers. According to the slaves’ folk beliefs, Louvinie transferred her capacity for powerful speech onto the Sojourner. As Susan Willis writes:

Named The Sojourner, the magnolia conjures up the presence of another leader of black women, who, like Louvinie, used language in the struggle for liberation. In this way, Walker builds a network of women, some mythic like Louvinie, some real like Sojourner Truth, as the context for Meridian’s affirmation and radicalization.15

So many tales and legends had grown up around The Sojourner that students of every persuasion had a choice of which to accept. There was only one Sojourner ceremony, however, that united all the students at Saxon -- the rich and the poor, the very black-skinned ... with the very fair, the stupid and the bright -- and that was
the Commemoration of Fast Mary of the Tower. It was the only time in all the many social activities at Saxon that every girl was considered equal. On that day, they held each other's hands tightly. Louvinie's Sojourner tree also commemorates Sojourner Truth, an escaped slave woman who questioned the white women who tried to deny her right to speak. Sojourner Truth's mythical voice exemplifies the struggle for wholeness and equality. Walker indicates the power of the age-old tradition of story-telling in the African-American culture. *Meridian* is set in coastal Georgia where the oral and musical traditions are significant. One of the most forcible characteristics of Walker's fiction is her abiding interest in the paradoxes of southern life. Despite its racial and sexual oppressions, she shares this deeply felt connection, her attachment to the history and people of the South. Meridian draws her strength from and discovers her regenerative power in the South.

Meridian's scholarship was not sufficient for her requirements. So she works as an assistant to a black Professor called Raymonds. Raymonds is a staunch supporter of black people's rights and boasts of protecting the virtue of black women. But in his private life, he oppresses the black women as much as the whites do. However, Meridian some how works with him. Meridian's involvement in the Civil Rights Movement introduces her to experience the feelings of passion and love. She falls in love with Truman Held, a revolutionary who spoke French. Meridian loved being with Truman. She felt protected when she was with him. To her he was courageous and new. He was, in any case, unlike any other black man she had known. He was a man who fought against obstacles, a man who could become anything, a man whose very words were unintelligible without considerable thought.
She succumbs to his physical charm and deliberately yields to his seduction knowing very well about his flirtatious flings with the exchange students. But Meridian could not altogether leave Truman. She temporarily tries to keep out of her mind her thoughts about exchange students and gets involved with Truman. “The exchange students were banished to a corner of the world her thoughts did not need to follow. She chased them there with an imaginary broom, invented special for that purpose” (111).

Walker here highlights sexual abuse and the exploitation of the black women in the hands of black men. Truman, after impregnating Meridian, leaves her, falls in love with a white exchange student, Lynne Rabinowitz, and marries her. Thus Walker presents the triangular relationship of a black woman, black man, and white woman. Black men see white women as frivolous, helpless creatures, lazy, and without ingenuity. Meridian herself has a low opinion of them. She thinks, “Who would dream, in her hometown, of kissing a white girl? Who would want to? What were they good for? What did they do? They only seemed to hang about laughing, after school, until when they were sixteen or seventeen they got married. Their pictures appeared in the society column, you saw them pregnant a couple of times. Then you were no longer able to recognize them as girls you once “knew”. They sank into a permanent oblivion” (105). But some of the black men wanted white women only because they were the closest thing to power they could get in White America. Lynne represents white women driven by racial guilt. Her relationship with Truman does not run on smooth lines. After some years, Truman’s feelings for Lynne begin to change. He believes his friend Tommy Odds (who hated Lynne) had some affair
with his wife. "By being white Lynne was guilty of whiteness" (131). Lynne is raped by Truman's friend Tommy Odds. That particular scene depicts not only Tommy’s role as a rapist and villain but also evokes complex social issues. In exploring his behaviour, it develops the ambivalent feelings that some Black men at the time experienced toward white women. "He had wanted to make love to her. Because she was white, first of all, which meant she would assume she was in control, and because he wanted -- at first -- to force her to have him in ways that would disgust and thrill her. He thought of hanging her from a tree by her long hair and letting her weight gradually pull the hair from her scalp. He wondered if that would eventually happen to a person hung up in that way" (158). In exploring Tommy's motives, the novel juxtaposes two discourses: one focused on Blacks, particularly Black males as victims of racist oppression; the other on women as victims of rape, one of the most extreme acts of sexist terrorism. Lynne's whiteness becomes a signifier of her difference from Meridian and the Black community in which she has immersed herself. Walker presents her as naive, coarse, and victimized. There is reluctance on her part to report the incident to the police because of fear of the terror that would be inflicted on Black males in the community in general and further because of her acquiescence to the sexual demands of the Black males around her. This depiction of Lynne is consistent with the ambivalent feelings that characterize Walker’s attempts to explore the possible union of White and Black women. As a White woman, Lynne becomes a signifier of difference and sameness. Her representational status within the social discourse is compromised by her whiteness, while her status as woman places her in a common sisterhood. Although Lynne is married to Truman and participates in the Civil Rights Movement and works for the
blacks, she is refused acceptance as one among them. She is thereby branded as killer and evil. Truman could neither leave Lynne nor keep her. They bear a child, Camara, as a sign of their interracial relationship. Truman wanted to have Meridian as his wife. But he could not accept her after he learns that she is a married woman with a child: “He had wanted a virgin, had been raised to expect and demand a virgin. He had wanted a woman perfect in all eyes of the world, not a savage who bore her offspring and hid it” (140-141).

Meridian, after her horrible experience of undergoing an abortion and having her tubes tied up, leaves Atlanta and settles down in a small Mississippi town. She feels humiliated and bitter as a woman who has been used and discarded by a man. She goes to her people as a Civil Rights worker and remains close to them, “to see them, to be with them, to understand them and herself, the people who now fed her and tolerated her and also, in a fashion, cared about her” (19).

Truman Held is one among many Black men who suffer from double consciousness. He is totally confused and is spiritually broken in the white society. He fails to accept Lynne just for the simple reason that she is white. He leaves her and their child, Camara, and sets off in search of Meridian. He starts craving for her love and grace which flowed like a special sun. When Camara was brutally murdered, he could turn to none except Meridian. He desperately wanted her so that she can help him come out of the trauma. Truman tries to cleanse himself of his guilt. Meridian forgives him and gives him an opportunity for self-realisation. “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). Meridian sets Truman free, and in doing so, she frees herself of the pain, agony, and bitterness. When asked by Truman about her true feelings toward him, she says, “You are free to be whichever way you like to be with whoever, of whatever color or sex you like -- and what you risk in being truly yourself, the way you want to be, is not the loss of me. You are not free, however, to think I am a fool” (223). Meridian, however, refuses to be a “port” or a “shed” (139) in his life. She makes him realise that search for wholeness is an individual search. Though she feels sorry for Truman, she is helpless and is obliged to leave him for the sake of her people.

Truman does not get destroyed like Brownfield in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*. He indeed gets a chance like the old Grange to atone for his sins. Meridian’s life inspires Truman to undertake his quest for self. He takes up Meridian’s place and would continue her mission. He occupies her house. “It was his house now, after all. His cell. Tomorrow the people would come and bring him food. Someone would come and milk his cow. They would wait patiently for him to perform, to take them along the next guideless step. Perhaps he would” (228). In the words of Barbara Christian, Truman’s search for wholeness is “a continuing process rather than an adventure that ends in a neat resolution.”16 Walker concludes the novel with an episode in which Truman performs a ritual of confirmation and acceptance of his new role. “He manifests the ecstasy associated with the prophetic tradition by falling in a trance; and he symbolically takes up the mantle of his predecessor by climbing into her sleeping bag and putting her cap on his own head.”17
Meridian passes through a series of temptations in order to reach out to her goals of expanded consciousness and independent selfhood. She is in a constant process of growth. Her flexibility and unfixed mental state allow her to grow out of the stereotyped predetermined mould. Even at a very young age of thirteen, Meridian failed to do what her mother had wanted her to do. She was unable to go forward and accept Christ as her Saviour. It was from that day that she felt her mother’s love had 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” (17).

During her stay in Saxon College, Meridian occasionally fell sick. In her sickness, she came close to death. She was haunted by dreadful dreams. She had recurring nightmares in which she would dream that “she was a character in a novel and that her existence presented an insoluble problem, one that would be solved only by her death at the end” (115). Meridian feels completely weighed down by guilt for not living up to her mother’s standards. It seemed to Meridian that her legacy from her mother’s endurance, her unerring knowledge of rightness and her pursuit of it through all distractions, was one she would never be able to match. Meridian is nursed back to normal health by a motherly figure, Miss Winter, a teacher at Saxon. She saves Meridian by granting her the forgiveness which her mother refused to grant her. “Now and again she saw clouds drift across Miss Winter’s head and she amused herself picking out faces that she knew. When she slept 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. “Mama, I love you. Let me go,” she whispered, licking the salt from her mother’s black arms. Instinctively, as if Meridian were her own child, Miss Winter answered, close to her ear on the pillow, “I forgive you” (123). Miss Winter’s words bring Meridian back on to the road to physical as well as mental health. Her trances teach her the value of life over death. She is able to see clearly death in its relationship with life.

Meridian’s father owned a farm and he was very much interested in it as it was part of the Indian burial ground, the Sacred Serpent. The farm was so called because of its raised mounds which were later turned into a tourist attraction, a public park. The coil of the Sacred Serpent, a deep hollow pit, created a mysterious sensation to those who entered it. Even Meridian could feel its effect. “She felt renewed, as from some strange spiritual intoxication. Her blood made warm explosions through her body, and her eyelids stung and tingled” (49-50). Her father said the Indians had constructed the coil in the Serpent’s tail in order to give the living a sensation similar to that of dying: the body seemed to drop away, and only the spirit lived, set free in the world. But Meridian was not convinced, “It seemed to her that it was a way the living sought to expand the consciousness of being alive, there where the ground about them was filled with the dead” (51).

Meridian’s ultimate refusal of death and her rejection of the attempts of others to mould her into their patterns is her hard-won triumph. From her repeated
encounters with death and deathliness, she gains the knowledge and strength to achieve a new birth of self. Later in the novel Truman compares Meridian to Lazarus but feels that the analogy is not appropriate. Lazarus needed help in coming back to life, whereas Meridian is strong enough to rejuvenate the life back to normal. Meridian refuses to die. She had once welcomed death. She tells herself that, "The only new thing now," ... "would be the refusal of Christ to accept crucifixion. King," ... "should have refused. Malcolm, too, should have refused. All those characters in all those novels that require death to end the book should refuse" (151). She leads a quiet revolution. Meridian fights for a simple reason and that is to assert the right to see a freak show on a day other than that designated for the blacks. Her fight is a silent yet daring feat. She simply stands facing the tank aimed at her. Even the men who aimed the tank to shoot her ultimately had to give up. They crawl out of the tank sheepishly and begin to stare at her.

Although Meridian gives up her own child, she always loved and cared others' children. She protected them directly or indirectly and fought on their behalf for their well being and benefit. Meridian brings to the notice of the town people a ditch that runs behind her house which had become a deathtrap for neighbouring children who did not know how to swim. She even goes to the extent of carrying the decomposed body of the five-year old boy drowned in the ditch, and lays it next to the mayor's gavel. "Throughout her quest she is surrounded by children whose lives she tries to preserve. In seeking the children she can no longer have she takes responsibility for the life of all the people. Her aborted motherhood yields to her a perspective on life -- that of 'expanding her mind with action.'"
Meridian challenges the image of a woman as a passivist. She refuses to be a woman of "mindless body, a sex creature, something to hang false hair and nails on" (65). She exhibits leadership qualities which are a characteristic feature of a male. She acts like one in her struggle for rights when she bravely faces the tank aimed at her chest. Even her dress reveals the change in her attitude. She is dressed in dungarees and wears a light coloured, visored cap of the sort worn by motormen on trains. Meridian triumphantly succeeds in overcoming tradition and authority. She in fact reverses her role of woman. "Such fluidity of personality is necessary" says Deborah E. McDowell "because rigid role definitions are static; by their very nature, they deny human complexity and thereby stifle growth, completeness of being."19

Meridian paves her own path to self-determination. She refuses to fit into the slot of a typical traditional, conventional African woman. Unlike Marilene O'Shay, the mummy in the street wagon, Meridian refuses to become a "dutiful daughter", a "devoted wife" or an "adoring mother" which were considered as the ideals of womanhood. Stein writes that:

In order to live, Meridian rejects the temptations of conventional middle-class life, the conventional women's roles of dutiful daughter, wife, mother, lover. But she must reject as well the contemporary temptations of martyrdom and false revolutionary consciousness, for these roles are death masks. While seeming to promise a fuller life or a greater self-knowledge, each of these patterns would obliter ate her selfhood beneath the mask others have painted for her to wear.20

Meridian lives a lonely life, that of an ascetic. But more often her way of living is self-destructive, her actions being determined so much by principles and
abstractions. She leads her life in utter poverty. She possesses nothing of her own. When Truman visited Meridian, she was living in a small room in the town of Chicokema, which gave him the feeling, that “he was in a cell” (10). “She owned no furniture, beyond the sleeping bag, which, on inspection, did not appear to be very clean” (10). Even the room she lived reflected her lack of interest in materialistic things. “The walls were of decaying sheetrock, with uneven patches of dried glue ... The sun through a tattered gray window shade cast the room in dim gray light” (10). Truman was alarmed to see her state of life. Her face was “wasted and rough, the skin a sallow, unhealthy brown, with pimples across her forehead and on her chin. Her eyes were glassy and yellow and did not seem to focus at once. Her breath, like her clothes, was sour” (11).

Meridian constantly reviews an idea which penetrates her life, the idea of non-violence, much against her friend Anne Marion’s opinion that to survive is to kill. All during her life Meridian is confronted with the question “Will you kill for the Revolution?” (14). She tries to seek an answer from her people, her community and heritage -- when is it really necessary to kill? When she was first asked by her friend Anne Marion whether she would kill for the revolution, Meridian expresses her inability to do so. She prefers to take the path of non-violence. Later in the novel, during her conversation with Truman, she argues with him saying “Is there no place in a revolution for a person who cannot kill?” Meridian is confused between the correct thing and the right thing. She says “The right thing is never to kill. The correct thing is to kill when killing is necessary” (193). She is excited to know that “black women were always imitating Harriet Tubman -- escaping to become
something unheard of. Outrageous,” and “even in more conventional things, black women struck out for the unknown” (105-106). She seeks her identity through the legacy passed on to her by southern Black women. Walker stresses the idea of death giving renewed life. As Karen Stein writes, “Walker’s novel affirms that it is not by taking life that true revolution will come about, but through respect for life and authentic living of life. This authenticity is gained only through each individual’s slow, painful confrontation of self.”

Barbara Christian observes that the novel Meridian is based on the idea of “the sacredness and continuity of life -- and on another, that it might be necessary to take life in order to preserve it, and make it possible for future generations.” “Walker,” she says, “persists in struggling with this age-old dilemma -- that of death giving life.” Therefore, “What the novel Meridian suggests is that unless such a struggle is taken on by those who would change society, their revolution will not be integral. For they may destroy that which they abhor only to resurrect it in themselves.”

Although Meridian struggles all her life to change society, her struggle being a personal one, it is only when she comes into contact with the everyday lives of the people that she realises “that the respect she owed her life was to continue, against whatever obstacles, to live it, and not to give up any particle of it without a fight to the death, preferably not her own. And that this existence extended beyond herself to those around her because, in fact, the years in America had created them One Life” (204).

Thadious M. Davis says that Meridian “divests herself of immediate blood relations -- her child and her parents -- in order to align herself completely with the
larger racial and social generations of blacks." Meridian Hill insists that although seemingly alone in the world, she has created a fusion with her generation of activist blacks and older generations of oppressed blacks. By the end of the novel her personal identity becomes part of their collective identity: "Meridian is born anew into a pluralistic cultural self, a "we" that is and must be self-less and without ordinary prerequisites for personal identity."  

Meridian's salvation comes from the Black church to which she had altogether stopped going. Whenever she was in a church, she felt claustrophobic, as if the walls were closing in. She had, even as a child, felt pity for the people who sat through the long and boring sermons listlessly fanning in the summer heat. She had always liked the music and the coloured stained glass windows. After many years she once again goes to church. She is surprised and puzzled to see the change, a change in everything. The traditional image of the church was wiped away and, "Instead of the traditional pale Christ with stray lamb there was a tall, broad-shouldered black man. He was wearing a brilliant blue suit through which the light swam as if in a lake, ... His face was thrown back, contorted in song, ... In one hand he held a guitar ... The other arm was raised above his head and it held a long shiny object the end of which was dripping with blood (203). Meridian is puzzled "that the music had changed. Puzzled that young people in church nowadays did not fall asleep. Perhaps it was, after all, the only place left for black people to congregate, where the problems of life were not discussed fraudulently and the approach to the future was considered communally, and moral questions were taken seriously" (203).
Meridian accepts the "church" not as a Baptist, Methodist or what not, but rather as a communal spirit promoting togetherness and righteous convergence. All what she needed was the old music, the song of the people, transformed by the experience of each generation, that holds them together. This act is best accounted by the critic, Sherley Anne Williams: "That pain plays a large part in Black music is evident in the lyrics of the blues, the spirituals, the gospels, in the raw harshness which has been such an important aspect in the development of jazz. Yet, there is the beautiful lyricism of Charlie Parker and John Coltrane which also expresses triumph and transcendence, the sly humor and laughing confidence, the will to make it on through, to work it on out which are also expressed in blues, gospels and spirituals." Meridian had denied herself the church as well as the music which was the one constant strength the black people had. The church and the old music which she had altogether denounced become for her "the necessary regenerative power which makes life possible." 

Meridian listens to the speeches of the people in the church and changes her thoughts. The sermon too has changed from an unintelligible one to a bold and powerful message. The priest admonishes the young men in the audience not to participate in the Vietnam War. He told the young women to stop looking for husbands and try to get something useful in their heads. He rebuked the older congregates and abused the black teachers for not working hard. God was not mentioned, except as a reference.

Meridian altogether experiences a new feeling. That Sunday was a special Sunday. The service on that day commemorates the death of a young martyr, who
was murdered in the struggle. Meridian is moved by the words of the boy’s father, which “came from a throat that seemed stoppered with anxiety, memory, grief and dope. And the words, the beginning of a speech he had laboriously learned years ago for just such occasions as this when so much was asked of him, were the same that he gave every year. The same, exact, three. “My son died”” (202). She feels a breaking in her chest “as if a tight string binding her lungs had given way, allowing her to breathe freely” (204). Her conversion leads her to take up a new approach to revolution. She makes a promise “to the red-eyed man ... that ... , she would kill, before she allowed anyone to murder his son again” (204). Upon perceiving her essential oneness with black humanity, Meridian reassesses her commitment to the racial struggle once again. This time she feels duty-bound to make a commitment. While throughout the novel she could not contemplate killing for the struggle, she now sees the need for it. Finally, she feels she can kill if need be, and this realization gives her confidence about her worth and her power. Her promise to kill for the revolution gives her a new hope to survive which initiates her first step towards health. Her resolve to kill weakens occasionally, for she thinks, “I have been allowed to see how the new capacity to do anything, including kill, for our freedom -- beyond sporadic acts of violence -- is to emerge, and flower, but I am not yet at the point of being able to kill anyone myself, nor -- except for the false urgings that come to me in periods of grief and rage -- will I ever be” (205). But at other times her dedication to her promise come back strongly. She needed only to see a starving child or attempt to register to vote a grown person who could neither read nor write:
On those occasions such was her rage that she actually felt as if the rich and racist of the world should stand in fear of her, because she -- though apparently weak and penniless, a little crazy and without power -- was yet of a resolute and relatively fearless character, which, sufficient in its calm acceptance of its own purpose, could bring the mightiest country to its knees. (206)

During the early days of her life in Saxon College, Meridian was frequently falling sick. All signs of her illness reflected the guilt created by the collective history of black women. "Meridian felt as if her body, growing frailer every day under the stress of her daily life, stood in the way of a reconciliation between her mother and that part of her own soul her mother could, perhaps, love. She valued her body less, attended to it less, because she hated its obstruction" (93). Her hair started falling and vision sometimes blurred. Even during her days in Mississippi, she was suffering from sudden seizures and would fall down stiff like a corpse. She was seemingly in a state of decay. But after the realisation of her role in the revolution, she begins her journey from illness to health. She becomes strong enough to go. Everything about her is once again renewed. Her hair starts growing again which frames her thin resolute face. She is strengthened and renewed. She "would return to the world, cleansed of sickness". "The new part had grown out of the old, though, and that was reassuring. This part of her, new, sure and ready, even eager, for the world, he knew he must meet again and recognize for its true value at some future time" (227).

Meridian's journey ends differently. As Deborah McDowell explains, the "continued progress of her search for identity requires that she go backward in order to move forward." And backward, as she says is the South, for "it is the
South that is the cradle of the black man's experience in the New world.²⁷ In this backward and blatantly racist small Mississippi town district, Meridian does penance for stealing her mother's serenity. Here she struggles with the bitterness she feels as a woman used and discarded by a man. Here she searches for answers to the dilemma of human being's injustice to one another. After suffering a long painful illness brought on by the guilt created by the collective history of Black women, she finally journeys towards health. As she comes to terms with her roots, she renews her strength and sustenance. Upto this point, her cultivation of self has necessitated her weeding out many of the most cherished values and institutions of the Western tradition. She is left, despite her deepened commitment to the racial struggle, with an existential alienation that is the mark of the twentieth century individual. It is in the South that Meridian rediscovers the power of the black past, accepts it, and draws strengths from its vital traditions like the symbiotic musical and religious traditions.

Unlike Walker's characterization of women in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, her characterisation of Meridian heralds the rise of the feminine. She also focuses on the changing views of Black women especially on motherhood. The know-nothing, ignorant Mrs Hill embodies the traditional position, largely self-effacing and destructive, whereas Meridian represents the emergence of a feminine dialect: "Meridian is a character whose inner tension combats her "sentence" to heroic action. But she neither dies, nor withdraws, nor is mainstreamed, but simply performs heroically and moves on toward a new phase of action."²⁶
Meridian begins her journey of self-discovery all alone and she undertakes it with courage and dignity. The novel ends on an optimistic note. Meridian’s quest in her journey is from “adolescent unawareness to self-knowledge, from death to rebirth, from confrontations with revolutionary ardor to a spiritual vision.”29 Thus, the self has bloomed, Meridian has found her identity, an identity fashioned not from Western tradition, but rather from the artifacts of her own heritage. At the end of the novel, she receives from her friend, Anne Marion, the picture of a gigantic tree stump from which a tiny branch is growing. It is from a tree, the Sojourner -- a symbol of both the black oral and musical traditions --planted during slavery on a plantation which later became Saxon College. Metaphorically speaking, Meridian is that branch from the Sojourner. The testimony that although systematic attempts have been made to destroy the tree, the nucleus, of black life, is not dead.

Meridian’s quest for black womanhood finally turns into a concern for the survival and wholeness of the entire black community. She finds the real meaning of her life in her very attempt to change the present social system for the benefit of all blacks, male and female. Meridian thus emerges as a liberated black woman with a hard-won insight into the riddles of life. Evidently the novel creates an image of the African-American woman with all her complexity, diversity, and depth.
REFERENCES


21 Karen F. Stein, "*Meridian: Alice Walker's Critique of Revolution,∗ " 140.


26 Sherley Anne Williams, *Giving Birth to Brightness*, 150.

