Modern American Journal of Linguistics, Education, and Pedagogy
ISSN (E): 3067-7874
Volume 2, Issue 11, November, 2026
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REDEFINING MOTHERHOOD IN MERIDIAN: ALICE WALKER'S VISION OF STRENGTH AND SACRIFICE

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Abstract

Alice Walker's Meridian offers a new perspective on the idea of motherhood, portraying it as both a personal challenge and a revolutionary act within a society shaped by racial and patriarchal structures. This paper explores how Walker deconstructs prevailing narratives of motherhood, especially those imposed on Black women, through Meridian's refusal to conform to traditional maternal expectations. Instead of accepting that fulfillment is found solely in biological reproduction, Meridian opts for self-empowerment and activism, reimagining caregiving as a dedication to social justice rather than merely a familial responsibility. Her choice to give up her child and terminate another pregnancy contests the idea that motherhood is an essential or obligatory element of womanhood. Furthermore, Walker's representation of Wild Child and the real historical circumstances of reproductive oppression illustrate the systemic forces that strip Black women of control over their bodies. By transforming the understanding of motherhood from a biological certainty to a radical act of nurturing change, Meridian provides a feminist critique of gender, autonomy, and the socio-political consequences of reproductive choices.

Keywords: Motherhood, Reproductive Rights, Black Feminism, Social Justice, Empowerment, Patriarchy.

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Introduction

In Alice Walker's novel Meridian, the concept of motherhood is carefully examined not just as a biological or societal function but as a multifaceted blend of personal identity, societal pressures, and individual defiance. By way of the protagonist, Meridian, Walker highlights the friction between the traditional, often confining, roles assigned to women and the quest for personal freedom and societal change. As Meridian navigates her experiences with motherhood, she emerges as a symbol of resistance against the usual narratives that define women's value primarily through their capacity to conceive and raise children. This paper examines how Walker utilizes Meridian's journey to challenge societal frameworks surrounding motherhood, offering a vision of female empowerment that transcends motherhood alone, instead anchored in personal agency, self-discovery, and activism. Viewed through this perspective, the novel provides a compelling investigation of how women can redefine their identities beyond the restrictions imposed by patriarchal standards.

Motherhood as Resistance: The Struggle for Female Identity in *Meridian*

Barbara Christian points out that the Meridian novel encompasses numerous significant themes, with one of the primary ones being the concept of motherhood. Walker explains that motherhood represents "a perspective on life" that honors all forms of existence and opposes anything that could threaten it by exploring the experiences of mothers (276). What also Barbara tries to explain how hegemonic idiotic rules of patriarchy surrounded the norms of the nation and society. When Meridian gets a scholarship and gives away her child, her mom is very furious and says: "Well, it can't be moral, that I know. It can't be right to give away your child.....Unless you're some kind of monster. And no daughter of mine is a monster, surely. I just don't see how you could let another woman raise your child. It's just selfishness. You ought to hang yourself in shame." (CP,87-90) The reason for her mother's thought is because Mrs. Hill apprehended the traditional life that was bound by patriarchal society. Rosemarie Tong states, "the patriarchal notion asserts that women who give birth should also be responsible for raising the children. Feminists have presented compelling counterarguments

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to this belief. They argue that it imposes excessive demands on women's bodies and depletes their energies" (84).

Women in society are marginalized groups who suffer from the lack of education unequal rights, and lack of life opportunities. Meridian brings a new dimension toward the concept of motherhood or recognition of black women, she shows that women are not only domestic, passive, ignorant, and dependent women. Therefore, she rejects to experience an ordinary, biological motherhood. She first acknowledges motherhood figure with her mother Mrs. Hill, her mother is an independent school teacher after her children, she struggles to keep her independence and career with the pressure of motherhood, she feels like she is being trapped and losing her personal life. Meridian recognizes that her mother is not suited to be a parent, even though she urges her to care for her child, who is fathered by her boyfriend Eddie. Pregnancy was a big challenge for Meridian, she thinks that being a mother will prevent her from becoming and finding her own true identity. The fact that she thinks of becoming a mother limits her freedom, it is something that will cut her off from the world outside. This leads her to reflect, "So this is what it feels like to be a slave" (Walker, 88). Each night, she starts to fantasize about killing Eddie. She becomes engulfed in uncertainty and indecision. This results in her feeling exasperated and considering harmful actions towards herself.

The woman in society have been abused and treated as a subject of sexual exploration since the slavery time when they had to sexually satisfy their master. According to Harris (2017), the suffering endured by victims during and following incidents of sexual abuse is severe. "For someone to reveal themselves as a survivor of sexual or physical abuse in a private setting is a difficult ordeal. Publicly naming the abuser adds an extra layer of complexity. There is no assurance that the perpetrator will be prosecuted legally." (P.1).Additionally, The emotional and physical turmoil associated with unwanted pregnancies stems directly from a sexually repressive perspective. Hooks notes that "Numerous individuals were the unexpected children of talented, creative women whose lives were altered by unplanned and unwanted pregnancies. We witnessed their frustration, their rage, and their dissatisfaction with their life situations" (2000, P. 26).

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Meridian is a naïve young woman who lacks knowledge about the implications of unplanned pregnancy, which results in her becoming a mother and leaving school after entering into a relationship. She terrified and desperate with this unplanned pregnancy that "she began to dream, each night, just before her baby sent outcries, of ways to murder him" (2011, p. 65). "If comprehensive sex education, preventive healthcare, and easy access to contraceptives are provided to every woman, there will be a decrease in unwanted pregnancies. Consequently, the necessity for abortions would also decline." Meridian is unwilling to accept pain or to elevate the self-sacrificing role of motherhood; she challenges the patriarchal system both as a woman and an activist, firmly rejecting the idea of sacrificing her identity or independence, or as her mother describes it, motherhood being equivalent to 'being buried alive. Consequently, she pursues the central goal of helping and taking care of the poor and black people, especially women and children. She becomes the ideal woman and mother as being helpful and supportive of especially black women and children who suffer a lack of independence, education, and female identity, she fights for them so that they can have a decent and equal life in society such as Wild Child boldly stands against a tank, solely to allow black children to participate in the circus show. Walker notes, “With strands of cake and colorful beads and pristine cigarettes, she lured Wild Child and ultimately subdued her. She brought her onto the campus with a catgut string tied around her arm” (2011, p.25). Thus, one cannot interpret her actions as mere acts of kindness; instead, it represents a true solidarity and a dedication to exposing the deep exploitation that they have faced and the resulting pregnancies.[1]The novel explores the impact of womanhood on The Wild Child, the next character to be affected.

“Bolting across a street with her belly being the most prominent aspect of her,” The Wild Child ultimately succumbs, primarily due to her pregnancy. Throughout her life, The Wild Child faces rejection from everyone except Meridian, and her story becomes a tool for political martyrdom. When the Saxon administration denies The Wild Child a burial, the students protest fervently in her honor.

[1] Barbara Christian, in her essay "An Angle of Seeing: Motherhood in Buchi Emecheta's Joys of Motherhood and Alice Walker's Meridian," featured in Black Feminist Criticism (New York: Pergamon, 1985), pages 211-52, examines the destruction of the Sojourner Tree by Saxon students as a demonstration that "it is sometimes black women who deny our own maternal history (often unintentionally)" (230).

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According to Andrea O'Reilly, there are ten ideological beliefs associated with patriarchal motherhood: essentialism, privatization, individualism, naturalism, normalization, idealism, biological essentialism, reliance on experts, intensification, and the depoliticization of motherhood. Expanding on Rich's observation that motherhood is shaped by cultural factors, it explores the variety of normative motherhood in relation to cultural and economic opportunities. Several studies illustrate how the contemporary portrayal of the "full-time stay-at-home mother" is characterized by isolation within the domestic sphere and financial reliance on her husband. The belief that being a stay-at-home mother embodies the ideals of good motherhood only developed after the war, leading to a reshaping of society and, specifically, to a transformation in female gender roles.[2] For example, in Alisa Gordaneer's narrative "The Pump and I," women serve as the main caregivers. The role of motherhood is acknowledged by the teenage mother, Allison Crews, who challenges common stereotypes by asserting, "I am not garbage. I am a mother" (37).In the same way, Firefox's role as a mother enhances her social standing in the story, as seen during a family dinner, "I am seven months pregnant. I am the matriarch in the family house. This causes some tension with my mother" (230). According to the principles of the new momism, a woman is only considered whole once she has a child, and she is expected to be the primary caretaker and completely dedicate herself to her children. (4).

As a gay author, Dan Savage comments on motherhood by calling them "breeder", "Breeders make babies…they breed. We don't. Gay people don't have to worry about birth control or children or expectations" (ix). However, "breeder" is a kind of racist term that was used by white masters to humiliate and dehumanize black women. Angela Davis describes the struggles faced by African-American mothers during slavery by noting that as the international slave trade began to decline, threatening the expansion of the burgeoning cotton industry, the slaveholding class increasingly relied on natural reproduction as the most dependable method to replenish and increase the domestic slave population. Thus, a premium was placed on the African American woman's reproductive

[2] By Andrea O'Reilly; Presented at MIRCI'S 20th anniversary conference, Toronto, Ontario <http://demeterpress.org/books/matricentric-feminism-theory-activism-practice>

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capacity. In the decades leading up to the Civil War, women were increasingly valued for their ability to bear children. Those who were deemed capable of bearing ten, twelve, fourteen, or more children were highly prized. However, this did not translate into a higher level of respect for Black women as mothers compared to their status as workers. Despite the widespread societal glorification of motherhood during the 19th century, this recognition did not extend to enslaved individuals.

According to slaveholders, enslaved women were perceived not as mothers, but as instruments for expanding the labor force. They were referred to as "breeders" and their value was determined solely by their ability to produce offspring that could be monetarily measured in terms of their reproductive capabilities.

Meridian made two critical choices in her life just to avoid the conception of the women's predetermined role in society; how the patriarchal society obligates women to be mothers to be respected. She doesn't want to be dependent on any man or any cultural norms that will restrict her freedom, dreams, and even her identity. That's why she made two critical decisions; the first one was giving away her child to continue her education and to have a voice as a woman, and the second was to abort Truman's baby. Because Meridian tries to keep her African American identity and her subjectivity as a free female. L. S. Cardon (2011) examines a critical perspective on exclusionary narratives in Walker's writing, stating, "Although the novel emphasizes ethnic and cultural identity, Meridian also questions conventional and restrictive ideas about identity formation that are based solely on one aspect of an individual's identity, such as race, religion, gender, or another factor, highlighting how these ideas can provide a sense of belonging while simultaneously failing to represent the intricacies of individual identity." (180) As Lynn Pifer discusses in her analysis of Meridian as an activist: "Meridian is not opposed to children or mothers having children, but rather to the expectations placed on women once they become mothers. This expectation suggests that a mother, especially the idealized Mother, must abandon her own identity and interests in order to devote herself entirely to her children" (86). Meridian doesn't accept the inevitable of marriage or motherhood instead she fights for "personhood" against collusive mothering. She of course experiences the pain and feels awful giving away from her children, the reason as Rich

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explains in the deconstruction of motherhood from a “natural” and “instinctual” bond and networking between kid and mother feeling of being a black mother. In the section called "Pilgrimage," Meridian accompanies Truman to see a young girl who has killed her child., she has no other options: her mother has rejected her and the baby. She claims, “I removed my heart and bit into it. It was my heart I tasted, I choked it until it perished. I concealed it near the river. My heart, which the wandering dog unearthed, barking for the master of that land. My heart, where am I, no one exists. And why do I continue to live without my heart? And what is this? And who on earth are you?” (Walker, 234).She, similar to Meridian, is confined in a cell, not the isolated space of a saint but a jail cell. Just like her mother, Meridian, she has been a mother who turned away from caring for her child. However, she has not managed to endure the ordeal as Meridian has. This desperate woman cannot forgive herself for killing her baby or anybody else she feels guilty and makes Meridian experiences an all-encompassing level of compassion and clarity regarding the task that motivates her:

I want to put an end to guilt
I want to put an end to shame whatever you have done my sister (my brother)
know I wish to forgive you
love you
it is not the crystal stone of our innocence
that circles us
not the tooth of purity
that bites bloody our hearts. (Walker, 235)

With this poem, Meridian tries to get rid of the guilt and shame that have been bothering her. She liberates herself from the legendary conception of motherhood that society and culture have forced upon her.

She has recently encountered a young girl who has taken the life of her own child and perceives her own image in the distressed, sorrowful, and enraged inmate. As noted by Stegeman (1974, cited in Frank 1987), he argues that “The New Woman embodies a concept of personhood in which the individual is seen as a separate entity rather than defined by her familial ties, where she bears the duty to pursue her own happiness instead of merely accepting her prescribed role, …and where she is required to critically evaluate her values rather than conform to a

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conventional tradition (p. 17).”Independent women's selfhood is embedded in Meridian’s concern, which causes the method of conflicting concepts regarding motherhood. This issue will be clarified using Mary O'Brien's concept of "reproductive consciousness," which refers to the emotional and social attitudes towards childbirth and parenting that are grounded in the biological processes of reproduction. O'Brien asserts that the historical differences in reproductive consciousness between males and females stem from the male's sense of disconnection during conception, in contrast to the "creative and mediative powers" of female reproductive work. I propose that the idea of "reproductive consciousness" will encapsulate the social and biological factors that shape a woman's choice to either embrace or decline motherhood.

Despite being told by everyone that she was an outstanding young mother, “it required all her effort to care for the child.” She was aware that giving her child away would be better for her and her son. Another woman would take care of her better, she feels “condemned, consigned and penitence for life” This choice enraged her traditional mother, who deemed the idea of adoption as unethical and brutal: “I cannot understand how you could permit another woman to bring up your child … It’s nothing but selfishness. You should be ashamed. I have six kids … even though I never desired to have any, and I have taken care of all of them myself” (86).Despite how tradition and moral values ask her to keep the child and be responsible no matter what the circumstances are, she thinks giving away her child was the best decision she has made. She doesn’t want to be like her mother who raises her children but was reluctant to educate and help them for their self-development. The key idea of the novel is that Meridian's distinctly "maternal" approach to activism questions the prevailing ideas about the conflict between self-affirmation and the responsibility of nurturing and caring for children. Meridian discovers her authentic self, aspirations, and journey through her involvement in the civil rights movement. movement, which is in opposition to the frame of violence but love, she can express her love and justice, help for her people through this movement is like motherhood who is deliberately giving her love and compassion for own society. She is a mother who sacrifices herself to understand the love of life and freedom.

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Independent women's selfhood is embedded in Meridian's concern which causes the method of conflicting concepts regarding motherhood. This concern will be explained with a term from Mary O'Brien's concept of "reproductive consciousness" refers to the emotional and social perspectives on childbirth and parenting, which are fundamentally rooted in biological reproductive processes. O'Brien highlights the historical difference in reproductive consciousness between men and women, attributing it to the male's estrangement during conception in contrast to the female's "creative and mediative abilities" in reproductive work. I'm suggesting that the conception of "reproductive consciousness" will describe these social and biological experiences that influence a woman's decision to just accept or reject mothering.[3]

Patriarchy and Women's Subordination

In this part, I will articulate the oppression of women under the patriarchal ideology economically psychologically, and socially. While our biology describes our sex, how sex, culture, and religion determine our gender which is defined by human behaviors and socially positioned as man and woman.

Patriarchy has been an issue through the years and feminism has attempted to change the mindset of patriarchal ideology and male domination and controlling the women in the society. Sylvia Walby states, "patriarchy is a framework that shapes the organization of social and domestic life, allowing men to dominate, exploit, and oppress women" (Walby 20). In a patriarchal society, women are placed in a subordinate position to men across all areas of life, which restricts their opportunities and upholds traditional gender roles. This system primarily relegates women to domestic duties such as raising children, managing the household, and preparing meals, thereby hindering their full participation in social, political, and economic domains.

The concept of patriarchy indicates that "men hold power within the major institutions of society" and that "women are excluded from such power." Nonetheless, this does not mean that "women are entirely devoid of power or lacking in rights, influence, and resources" (Lerner 1989:239). Patriarchy

[3] Reyes Lazaro, "Feminism and Motherhood: O'Brien vs Beauvoir," Hypatia 1, no. 2 (fall 1986): 87-102.

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enforces the idea of masculinity by amplifying the biological distinctions between men and women, ensuring that men consistently hold supervisory or masculine positions such as decision-making and leadership, and women always have been subordinated by their feminine features. This belief system holds such power that "men frequently secure what appears to be the voluntary consent of the women they control." They accomplish this "via institutions such as the academy, the church, and the family, which all reinforce and legitimize the subordination of women to men" (Millett 1977:35).

The patriarchal system is defined by power, supremacy, hierarchy, and competition. Thus, patriarchy represents a framework of social structures and practices wherein men control, subjugate, and exploit women regardless of their circumstances. The Feminist movement seeks to eliminate the oppression of women as it relates to race, class, and cultural background. To explain women and men functions in a society, I will use the selected classification of theories as transcendence/immanence, public/private, male/female, and subject/object dualisms under the feminism approach.

Waugh argues that being essentialist at this early phase of feminism was crucial to establish the movement on solid foundations. She views this as a phase in acknowledging oppression: if individuals have consistently been categorized as an 'object' within someone else's perspective or narrative, then achieving full identity will require embracing their role as the subject and posing the question, "Who am I?" This concept positions individuals as both an independent subject and an object; however, it enables women to engage with the subject position (despite its potentially deceptive nature) that the binary of man/subject: woman/other has historically denied them in relation to men.

On the other hand, ecofeminism increases the prosperity of the consciousness of women of oppression of the earth and the women as part of the same violation that was caused by male control. This field is experiencing rapid growth and has great potential within literary studies. that depicts the combination of ecologism and feminism. The objective is to illustrate an implicit connection between women and the natural world. In their 1990 work on eco-feminism, "Reweaving the World: The Emergence of Eco-feminism," Diamond and Orenstein assert that eco-feminism serves as a social movement that leverages the long-standing

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association between women and nature to enhance both feminist and ecological initiatives that seek to eliminate the oppression of women and the environment. German ecofeminist Maria Mies and Indian ecofeminist Vandana Shiva noted that "Whenever women have resisted ecological devastation or the danger of atomic destruction, they quickly recognized the links between patriarchal violence against women, others, and nature, and in challenging this patriarchy, we are committed to future generations, to life, and to the planet itself. Our understanding of this is profound and specific, derived from both our natures and our experiences as women" (2014, p. 14). Ecofeminism advocates for the cessation of all forms of oppression. It relates the exploitation and control of women to that of the environment and posits that there is a connection between women and nature stemming from their shared experiences of oppression within a patriarchal Western society.

Also, the social roles and qualities of women such as pregnancy, giving birth, caring, and nurturing, directly let them become the embodiment of nature.

According to ecofeminist Kate Sober nature is the womb of all human production and in the same way, women have the womb to produce humans so being feminine is not a negative but a powerful concept.[4]Philosophers like Linda Vance argue that eco-feminism ought to reconceptualize the relationship between women and nature as "sisters," highlighting their shared experience of oppression encountered by both women and the natural world.

Conclusion

Alice Walker's second novel, Meridian, is an exceptional work that profoundly illustrates the hierarchical differences between men and women. It narrates the tale of a female activist who was instrumental in the American Civil Rights Movement.While she was youthful and carefree, her life was dramatically altered by an unexpected pregnancy before turning seventeen. In many cultures, motherhood is regarded as a gift and a natural expectation of womanhood.

Traditional societal norms have compelled women to accept the notion that their purpose is to bear children, with motherly traits seen as innate, as women were

[4] See Franke, Katherine M. "Theorizing Yes: An Essay on Feminism, Law, and Desire." *Columbia Law Review*, vol. 101, no. 1, 2001, *JSTOR* <www.jstor.org/stable/1123512. Accessed 25 May 2021.>

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Volume 2, Issue 11, November, 2026
Website: usajournals.org
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believed to sustain the family unit: "By having and caring for children, women provided the slave family with a certain degree of protection against being sold or separated" (White 159),thus reinforcing the significance of motherhood in the perception of African American women who felt burdened by the need to fulfill the ideals of womanhood. Meridian reflects a connection to nature; much like other women, she learns to embody the culturally assigned female identity of being a mother, yet she does not genuinely feel joy or excitement about it. "She felt like a tiny dot, an insignificant speck in the vastness of existence, isolated and concealed. [...] It was within her mind that the sensation of lightness began. It was as if the earthly walls surrounding her expanded outward at a breathtaking pace, then began to spin erratically, lifting her out of her physical form and granting her the sensation of soaring. In this motion, she perceived the faces of her loved ones, the limbs of trees, the wings of birds, the edges of houses, blades of grass, and flower petals rush toward a point high above her, and she was pulled along with them, as twirling, as radiant, as liberated as they." (52-53)
This quality, passed down through generations, encourages Meridian to seek spiritual unity with nature. She perceives herself as more than what society labels women, prompting her to reject the roles of wife and mother. Rather, she creates a new persona for herself by deciding to end her pregnancy and fight against racism; this represents that Meridian's freedom from the limitations of motherhood and her evolving perspective on womanhood empower her to "transform her body from being a sexual and maternal object into a political force as she seeks to reclaim southern lands and political rights for the marginalized southern communities" (Stein 108).The novel Meridian champions the ideals of non-violence and advocates for women's rights and equality within society.

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Volume 2, Issue 11, November, 2026
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