

STEREOTYPE BLACK WOMAN: A STUDY OF ALICE WALKER'S *MERIDIAN*

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Abstract

Black women are always presented as stereotypes. They in literature Sexism particularly relates to female sex. It also connotes the socio cultural subordination of female sex. But when it is attributed to Black woman, it relegates her from subordination to a sexual object. This is what usually happens with Black women in Meridian. From the point of view of sexism her victimization is biological. According to Freud woman's role in social and domestic life is influenced by her biology. By intertwining lack of racial supremacy and biological weakness Walker heighten Black women's suffering. Woman is treated as a tender, soft and beautiful object to be protected. Her sphere of work is also confined. In this confinement alone woman is allowed dignity. But African American women who are strong, tough and Black are seen as voluptuous from the very beginning of slavery. Therefore, even after the abolishment of slavery, they are treated as sexual objects, both by White and Black men. They are not allowed to have any dignity. Race makes a difference between the femininity of Black and White women. Therefore sexism, as a term is particularly related to the Black women. Meridian, a Black girl, learns through her experiences that her gender identity is confined only to a sexual object. Yet Walker shows Meridian achieving Womanism.

Key Terms:

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Meridian, (1976) a second novel by Alice Walker is a taut novel encompassing the events of twenty five years, 'although most (events) occur between the height of the civil rights movement and the present.' (Bryfonski 1978, 557) Walker begins this novel with where she left *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970) because it continues to question the social change and the existence of the 'tradition' (T. S. Eliot), i.e. past, in present and future. Can the Blacks create a bright future by destroying the past which is 'a past born in suffering, and fed by violence, continued by powerlessness?' (Christian, Gates and Appiah 205) Walker now brings her female character out of domestic confinement and presents her as fighting for the cause of Black community. Barbara Christian, in *The Black Women Novelist, The Development of Tradition* (1980) points out that *Meridian* moves on from 'a procession of generations to the history of black people in the South up to a peak period in 1960s.' (Christian, Gates and Appiah 205) Meridian Hill is an activist who is in search of 'wholeness'. Mrs. Hill, Meridian's mother, like Margaret (TTLoGC) is a victim of the socio cultural milieu of the South America. Due to her personal outrage and anger stemming from socio historical forces she victimizes her own children. They can not establish a meaningful and close relationship with each other. 'The result is a tension and guilt ridden existence, both for Mrs. Hill and for her family.' (Matuz 404) Therefore *Meridian*, like *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, is a psychological study of African Americans in the racist America during and before Civil Rights Movement. Walker introduces Meridian as a 'weird gal that strolled into town last year---. She started to round up every one of the po' kids she could get her hands on. She look so burnt out and weird in that old cap she wear ---.' (Walker 6) A man in Chicokema tells Truman, a painter and Meridian's co-worker in The Civil Rights Movement, who is seeking Meridian in South, that 'this town's got a big old army tank, --- and now they going to have to aim it on the woman in the cap, 'cause she act like she don't even know they got it.' (Walker 2)

This incident, in the beginning of the novel, takes place in 1970s, from which the plot moves back to the 1960s and Civil Rights Movement and then back to the history of Black women in America and again comes to 1970s. In 1970s, though, the zeal of nonviolent protest was over, Meridian was still observing it with the same zing to fight for all – Black, poor, men, women and children. It's her holiness and commitment to the cause that 'for every exemplary act of bravery for the black community (standing on the tank so black children can see a peepshow) she pays an immediate price in her body.' (Bryfonski 557) Her holiness, commitment and satisfaction in pain definitely are the attributes of a saint and a masochist.

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Walker has rightly called Meridian and Mem (TTLoGC) as saints but for Meridian it's renunciation through suffering. Her suffering is directly related to the racial cause with slight reference to the class and abuse attributed to Blacks. The owner of the peep show and the husband of Marilene O'Shay who is 'dead for twenty five years, preserved in life like condition', (Walker 4) calls the Black children 'dirty little bastards.' (Walker 5) It exposes one more attribute of Black women i.e. sexism about which Walker has not discussed clearly and elaborately in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*.

Sexism as Valerie Russell, in "Racism and Sexism, A collective Struggle: A Minority Woman's Point of View" (2004), defines 'any attitude, action or institution structure which systematically subordinated a person or a group because of their sex.' (web- Women's Liberation Movement) The definition connotes the socio cultural subordination based on sex i.e. gender discrimination. Revised and Updated Oxford Dictionary (1980) particularly relates sexism to female sex. It also connotes the socio cultural subordination of female sex. But when it is attributed to Black woman, it relegates her from subordination to a sexual object. This is what usually happens with Black women in *Meridian*.

Walker presents Meridian as a woman with mental toughness and confidence about her goal in life. She doesn't remain languishing in domestic life, waiting for some positive turn, as Mem in *The Third life of Grange copeland* does. She, a determinist, leaves her child and husband to move through college and Civil Rights Movement where she confronts the same question on which *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* ends. Is killing and hating necessary to secure one's future? Meridian is ready to die for the revolution but when asked 'will you kill for the Revolution?(Walker 14) She can not say 'yes' to it. To be revolutionary needed anger, hatred, and protest against the white, but Meridian to the astonishment of several critics is a 'mythic figure', and as Marge Piercy calls her 'a saint'.(Marowski&Matuz 422) She pays the price for that. When she realizes that she cannot kill for revolution 'she loses her hair, dons a cap and dungarees, lives alone --- to find her own health while she helps the black people --- finds power.'(Schmitt, Deborah 373)

She loses her health but doesn't turn into a brute like Brownfield and Grange (TTLoGC) who in his first life turns into a brute due to his failure to be a responsible man. Like Margaret (TTLoGC) she doesn't prove to be a weaker sex but takes a flight out of the failure like a phoenix and moves towards 'wholeness'. She finds strength in loving and helping her community as Celie in *The Color Purple* (1982) finds in loving the 'keep' of her husband. Here Walker's stance is of a humanist and 'Womanist' who believes not in anger and violence for change but in appreciation of each other for improvement. Here Walker throws light on the concept of woman who derives strength from love and help for others and not from destruction. In *Meridian* this is what Walker means by 'Womanism'. At the same time she asserts the human right to fight and raise voice against oppression. It's true that equality between men and women will not harm the rights of each other if only no politics is involved in their relations. Walker's 'Womanism' doesn't involve any politics in it. Yet, ironically Walker's

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presentation of the brutality of Black men towards Black women is definitely a realist's political stance because she wanted to help black men and women against their oppression.

Racism and sexism go hand in hand in *Meridian*. Meridian's aggressive, though nonviolent behavior, in the beginning of the novel - leaving her husband and child, smoking, coming alone to South America achieving scholarship - is against the paradigm of social expectations from women existing in the socio historical and cultural milieu of America of the 60s. It is, in David Clover and Cora Kaplan's words, deviation and therefore unfeminine. Her behavior is not appreciable within the existing culture because her 'supposed coldness, aggression, ambition, neglect of children or high intelligence can quickly bring this (being unfeminine) accusation'(Clover and Kaplan 3) Deviation from femininity brings abuse for a woman. It thwarts her personality.

While discussing femininity as a trope David Clover and Cora Kaplan discuss the relationship between gender and sexuality. According to them 'questions of gender and sexuality are especially difficult to prize apart when femininity is under discussion'(Clover and Kaplan 4)Femininity or gender attributes, in general are purely based on sex. Woman is treated as a tender, soft and beautiful object to be protected. Her sphere of work is also confined. In this confinement alone woman is allowed dignity. But African American women who are strong, tough and Black are seen as voluptuous from the very beginning of slavery. Therefore, even after the abolishment of slavery, they are treated as sexual objects, both by White and Black men. They are not allowed to have any dignity. Race makes a difference between the femininity of Black and White women. Therefore sexism, as a term is particularly related to the Black women. Meridian, a Black girl, learns through her experiences that her gender identity is confined only to a sexual object. She should be possessed by someone. Meridian's relationship with her boyfriend, Eddie, who later on becomes her husband, also focuses on Meridian's innocence regarding sexuality. She doesn't relate to Eddie on sexual terms. She allows him to relate to her sexually because it provides her security. It relieves her from the fear of other boys. Walker writes about Meridian's experience regarding this. She writes:

being with him did a number of things for her. Mainly it saved her from the strain of responding to other boys or even noting the whole category of men. This was worth a great deal, because she was afraid of men ---and was always afraid until she was taken under the wing of whoever wandered across her defenses to become ---in remarkably quick time --- her lover. This then was probably what sex meant to her, not pleasure.---

---She could make male friends only when she was sexually involved with a lover who was always near if only in the way a new male friend thought of her as "so-an -so's girl".
(Walker 57)

Walker describes the socio cultural milieu through Meridian's experience as a passive sexual partner. She appears a pure and saintly woman, neither passionate nor a licentious. She has no wish to attract boys for gratification of her passion. Yet each boy, in her contact, tries to relate with her sexually. This shows how even in the advanced country like America a Black

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woman's identity is not only sexualized but also capitalized. She must always belong to a 'man'. Sexualizing and capitalizing the Black women connotes the power structure in the cultural pattern which has denied separate and liberal identity to them. Due to sexism they become the weaker sex and cannot edify themselves to equal position of men.

Walker is very bold and honest in her presentation of sexism in her works. Yet sexism as power politics is not like capitalizing and sexualizing of women in general. It has typical Black cultural implication. Black women are abused at the hands of brutal Black men. Though as a lover and husband, Eddie, doesn't prove to be a brutal man we cannot ignore the licentious life inflicted on Meridian by Black men about which she has been ignorant in the beginning. By presenting Meridian as pure, holy and saint like, Walker disproves that Black women are promiscuous and loose. It's her attempt to focus on the brutality of Black men who victimized Black women.

Draxter's attempt to attract twelve year old innocent Meridian by giving her a candy is, in fact, his first step towards the sexual exploitation of Meridian. 'At first she thought Daxter as generous ---. When she became older --fifteen ---he felt her breasts and tried to pull her on to his lap.'(Walker 62)His assistant also, in his absence, 'begged for pussy --- Holding her with her back tight against him so that his penis was like a hard, live bedpost against her hips ---he would urge, grabbing one, then both of her nipples ---.' (Walker 62-63)When he didn't get positive response from Meridian for his amorous attempts, he 'arranged for her to watch him while he seduced another school girl.' (Walker 63)(the same girl in fact who did baby-sitting for his wife) Of course she leaves Daxter and the assistant when she becomes involved with Eddie, a waiter and short order cook at a restaurant. She becomes 'so- an- so's girl'. Kate Millett terms this as 'sexual politics which treats the other gender, especially women as inferior and as persons who can not exist autonomously.' (Kulkarni 100)Sexual politics becomes, for men, a weapon to blunt women's growth. Therefore Black women are doubly dehumanized at the hands of both, white and Black men, who treat them as just an object.

The southern white men, who had been sexually exploiting Black women during slavery and even after its abolishment, have labeled them as loose and promiscuous women by presenting them as craving for sex. In this way they could rationalize rape of the Black women 'as the natural craving of black women for sex rather than the licentiousness of the planter.'(Kulkarni 93) It provided a ready made background for the Black men who used the same strategy and made Black women scapegoats for their own licentiousness and frustration. This makes it clear that Walker's stance in the novel is that of a feminist. At the same time it clears doubt about the presentation of stereotype Black women – loose, promiscuous and licentious, though silent and passive yet indulgent in sex (as Meridian is). As a feminist Walker has presented the true experiences of the helpless Black women of 1960s and 70s. When Meridian wants old Prof. Remond, a doctor from Sexon College, to perform abortion and tie her tubes, he says, 'I could tie your tubes --- if you'll let me in on some of all this extra curricular activity.' (Walker 119) It's not only gender but race on the top of it which carried these women to the most degraded status. 'The phallic stance the black men held towards black

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women made them what Michele Wallace calls "Black machos" that not only treated their women as inferior beings but even abused them in every conceivable way.'(Kulkarni 100)

Race, gender and class are all power structures devised to oppress the powerless. A white woman may suffer due to her subordinate gender but enjoys benefits of both race and class power in a racist America as long as she remains a part of the power structure. If she questions it and tries to equate herself with Black race she loses her power as a white woman and is victimized by sexist Black men. Lynne, a white Jew woman, marries, Truman, a Black. She wants to experience the Civil Rights Movement through actively participating in it. She too experiences racism and cannot erase her history and race. Barbara Christian says that 'by marrying a Black man and living in Mississippi, Lynne gives up the protection of the white man and therefore becomes in the eyes of the world a slut.' (Gates and Appiah 96) Due to her marriage to a Black man she is not only cut off from her people and white class but also from her virtues (character). And to her dismay the loss of virtue doesn't prove to be only metaphorical but also physical. Therefore racism is not a colour conflict but socio cultural power politics. It's only colour capitalized and sexualized. In the end of the novel Truman's friends (Black), 'out of sheer hatred for the white rape Lynne. Lynne wished she could go to the police, but she was ---afraid of them--- because they would attack young black men in the community indiscriminately, and the people she wanted most to see protected would suffer.'(Walker176)

She is victimized and dehumanized, due to her race and 'the mystique of it, the danger of it, historically verboten nature of it'. (Walker 176) She remained just a colour and female in the eyes of Tommy Todds (the Black rapist). This raises questions about the supremacy of white race. At the same time it affirms the racial supremacy of the white not as biological but as socio cultural. From the point of view of sexism her victimization is biological. According to Freud woman's role in social and domestic life is influenced by her biology. By intertwining lack of racial supremacy and biological weakness Walker heighten Black women's suffering.

The Blacks in America have, after the abolishment of slavery, followed the white patriarchy. Masculine supremacy bestowed on them the legacy to brutalize their women. Besides patriarchy they ascribed to many other white's standards and parameters of life. Their aspiration for white beauty is a firm rejection of their own race. It can be seen in Lynne's rape by Tommy Todds and his friends. They get their lust for the white beauty gratified through it. In Truman's act of marrying Lynne, Walker explicitly focuses on the desire of the Black man for the white woman. Though Marge Piercy looks at it as 'the possibility of interracial love and communication ---' (Bryfonski 557) it is a marriage Truman makes with the dual purpose of possessing Lynne (a white woman) and brutalizing Meridian. After making love to Meridian and after knowing she has a son he refuses to marry her because 'he had wanted a virgin -'.(Walker 150) Meridian responds by saying, 'in Lynne you captured your idea, a virgin who was eager for sex and well to do enough to have had world experiences.' (Walker 150) Moreover in the eyes of an educated Black activist like Truman the status of a Black woman, in

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spite of her education, is low and he looks down upon her due to her racial identity. In *Black Women Novelists, the Development of Tradition* Barbara Christian says that:

their Communities have not absorbed the reality that awaits the black women; that the Community has itself internalized the image of the lovely, faithful, beloved wife who stays at home, rears neat well behaved children, and presents her husband with luscious meals and clean smelling sheet – this image is a corrupted fantasy, seldom attainable” for the black.(Christian 245)

Therefore a critic has rightly pointed out that in *Meridian* ‘Walker also addresses sexual politics within the movement and hypocrisy among some black nationalists.’ (Matuz 403) On the other hand Truman’s rejection of *Meridian* is analogous to *Meridian*’s leaving her child with her mother. Both reject the Black tradition. *Meridian* who has experienced her mother’s frustration, rage and miscommunication doesn’t want to recycle the same for her child. She leaves both Truman and her son free from bondage. She looks at every incident from a distance and accepts it. It marks her spiritual growth towards achieving ‘wholeness’. Therefore she can establish friendship and continue to live with Lynne. Walker presents her as capable of woman’s solidarity.

Thus *Meridian* sheds off the traditional stereotype Black woman and changes the old values and takes a step forward for change. However sexism though biologically determined oppression is gendered oppression too. It’s an offshoot of male dominated society in which even the white woman is confined within the paradigm established by men. So that is the importance of the incident of Merilene O’Shay, an “obedient daughter”, a “Devoted wife”, --- Which Walker has satirized in the very beginning. Woman, black or white, has to live up to the gender attributes. Therefore *Meridian* becomes a study in gender and race. During sixties and after that the Blacks have struggled and raised their class but earlier it was difficult to raise their class and maintain it due to racism and sexism. In *Meridian*, Walker again focuses on the double/multiple jeopardy of the Black women. Therefore she cannot end her novel with a romantic note showing *Meridian* getting married or martyred. Walker here also penetrates into the reality that a Black woman (*Meridian*) who is victimized both with racial and gender bias cannot get a good husband she aspires for. She cannot die because she has learnt, as a Black woman, to struggle with her spiritual strength.

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