

daughters were educated up to the University level. She is compared to Goddess Isis, the ancient Egyptian goddess.

Zaynab rebelled against many things and she instilled her rebellious spirit into her daughter. She threatened to leave the house one day when her husband shouted at her angrily. Her voice shook with anger when she said, "I am ready to go from house to house washing clothes rather than live with a man who allows himself to shout at me" (DI 6).

Although Zaynab came from the ruling Turco-Albanian class --indeed, her father was a Bey, -- her family had fallen into genteel poverty. She was married off at the age of fifteen to a man sixteen years her elder who came from the lowest class, the peasantry. Saadawi's father, Al-Sayed, was the first man to leave his village of farmers in a suit. He had succeeded in rising to the middle class through educational achievement and spent his entire working life as a civil servant fighting to extend education to all Egyptians. Perhaps because she was forced to stop her education, Zaynab Hanem Mahmoud Shoukry was determined that her daughters would not be denied higher education. Nawal recounts her mother's regrets in life, indicating that they had a profound effect on her:

My mother was not a doctor, or a writer. She had no job, no income of her own, no place in which she could live apart from her husband's home, but she preferred to leave him rather than sacrifice herself-respect and pride. Mother had a happy life in many ways. She was not like the other women in the family. She regretted being just a housewife. Ever since her early school days she had dreamed of other things..."I wanted to be a musician, and play music, or to finish my education and find a place where I could experiment and invent something useful. I dreamt of galloping on a horse to the horizon, of riding in an aeroplane to see the world, but your grandfather Shoukry took me out of school and married me off to your father. (DI 6)

Saadawi is very well aware that her mother's sacrifices, love, and support allowed her to continue and complete her education. Even though Zaynab died at the age of 45, she lived to see all of her daughters educated. "When their mothers' fulfilment makes girls sure they want to be women, they will not have to 'beat themselves down' to be feminine; they can stretch and stretch until their own efforts will tell them who they are. They will not need the regard of boy or man to feel alive" (Friedan 331). The many sacrifices made by Saadawi's mother in order that her nine children receive a good education are eye-opening to many Westerners who take good quality education and a much higher standard of living for granted.

List of abbreviations:

DI - A Daughter of Isis

MWP- Memoirs from the Women's Prison

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Killing of Innocence

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Incidentally I got chance
With friends to have a romance
What to do or don't, we were in dilemma
At last, we decided to go to cinema.
The movie was, I sooth
What pleases every youth
It was full of sensual appeal
Which does fulfill teenager's will?
It was when we just came out
Spectacles were changed out and out
A band of money hungry hen
Were looking for cock among men.
It were as if a sexy lover
Prefers dessert when dinner is over.
Of them, some were through professional
What we had seen never or occasional
They were to the core strumpets
Which was discernible from their etiquettes?
They were forcing y, z, and x
To accompany them to have sex
Once we refused to go
They started to abuse us in full flow.
I heard they were telling, oh brother!
Come if you have tasted
The milk of your mother!
We knew their vulgar design
So to their challenges
We decided not to resign.
Their abusive stance
Had nothing in it to wonder
What left me moving when I encounter
An adolescent girl from point blank range
Was hesitantly wooing me
For physical exchange.
Stopping by her for a moment
I wasn't in a mood to comment in a sense
To sight the murder of the innocence
In our country what we call so descent.
It's an incident of twelve years ago
Yet I am not able to forego
I forget her face and her utterance
But what haunts me even today
Is her innocence



The Feeling of Guilt –Motherhood at Stake in Alice Walker's *Meridian*

- B. Rajarajeswari Jeyarani

Abstract

This paper critically examines Alice Walker's *Meridian* with regard to motherhood. It demystifies the Victorian attitude and conventional belief. Motherhood is considered a different kind of slavery that is innate and fixed. This paper analyses the reasons for African American women's abdication of the age long reserved duty of pregnancy, delivery and rearing of children.

Keywords: Myth of African American Motherhood, feeling of guilt, victimisation, need for deliverance and motherhood in greater sense.

The African American woman's struggle is the focal idea in almost all the novels of Alice Walker. Walker's novels, in general, express her anguish at the African American woman's oppression and the consequent agonies. The wondrous fragility of life is compressed into the faces of the African American children, who like mist appear and reappear throughout her novels. Their melodic faces connect the bits and pieces of the South's complexity. What all of these children have in common is the precariousness of their existence. They may be aborted before they even have had a chance to live; they may have been given away, or assaulted, or killed. They may be motherless children or they may be the children who kill their own children.

Alongside their tentative child bodies, stand the seemingly substantial figures of African American mothers buttressed by the monumental myth of motherhood, a myth that is based on the true stories of sacrifice African American mothers had to commit for their children. Walker chronicles sacrifices of mothers, and thereby, pictures the entire Southern milieu in her novels. The history, then, of black Southerners is an essential piece of fabric in her fictional quilt, not as mere dates of battles or even as accomplishment of singular important African American figure but as the natural process of generation and regeneration of oppressive African American women's lives.

Meridian's mother marries Mr. Hill not out of love, but to appease her community. She is not interested in having children. But when she gets children, she feels that she could never forgive her community, her family, his family, and the whole world, for not warning her against

children. Meridian understands what is to be a mother by knowing her own mother and then again by becoming the mother of Eddie's child herself.

After becoming pregnant and delivering a child, Mrs. Hill understands that she has lost her frail independence to the pressures of motherhood, and learns that she is entrapped and her personal life is hurriedly put to an end. It is this understanding that enables her to instinctively interpret a look in the eyes of other women. It gives her a full knowledge of the fact that all these women are living just for their children are really dead. She becomes aware that she is "being buried alive, walled away from her own life, brick by brick" (53). Her children are a burden to her. They have led to the loss of her creativity. She wants to go back to teaching but fails in doing so because she cannot pass new examinations and does not like the new generation of students.

Motherhood for Mrs. Hill is a burden, and it represents the loss of her teaching position and more importantly, herself. However, she never instructs her adolescent daughter, Meridian, about sex and motherhood. She keeps her in a "state of ignorance and denies her a chance for better life" (67). Meridian also knows that her mother is not a woman who should have had children, and feels bad about stealing away her mother's serenity, and shattering her mother's emerging self. However, she is unable to undo what her mother has done to her.

Meridian also understands what it is to be a woman and more importantly to be a poor black woman, and a mother, only when she gives birth to Eddie, Jr. It happens very early in her life. When she starts leaving the house with her boyfriend, Eddie, her mother cautions her only to "be sweet" (67). But she never explains what it means. As a result, her delivery proves to be a trauma. Walker says:

She had been in hard labor for a day and a half. Then, when she brought the baby home, it had suffered through a month of colic, gasping and screaming and robbing her of sleep. She was so exhausted that it was futile to attempt to think straight, or even to think at all. It took everything she had to tend to her child and she had to do it, her body prompted not by her own desires but by her son's cries. (79)

Like Mrs. Hill, Meridian too realizes the loss of her independence. She has to live for her chills. This makes her think: "So this is what slavery is like" (79). Revolted by her situation, and by the feeling of guilt of spoiling her mother's dream, she begins to dream each night of ways to murder him. In her characteristic fashion, she is consumed by self-doubt and vacillation. This leads her toward frustration and even thoughts of self-destruction.

Alice Walker's novel, *Meridian* reveals the sense of shame that develops in the life of African American women, not necessarily because they have done something wrong, but because they feel that others have given up their lives for them. Their very existence calls for monumental suffering

and sacrifices from one another. At the peak of their sacrificial hierarchy, stands the relationship between the parent and child, the paradox of life-giving guilt. In bringing up children who are both unwanted and unappreciated by society, Walker's mothers [characters] sacrifice their lives. Children know that they survive only because of their parents' committed acts of extraordinary suffering. In this novel, the relationship between Meridian and her mother, or her maternal ancestors is the major, although not the only, factor through which the motif of guilt is explored. Walker traces:

Meridian found, when she was not preoccupied with the movement, that her thoughts turned with regularity and necessity to her mother, on whose account she endured wave after wave of an almost primeval guilt. She imagined her mother in church, in which she had invested all that was still energetic in her life, praying for her daughter's soul, and yet, having no concern, no understanding of her daughter's life whatsoever; but Meridian did not condemn her for this. Away from her mother, Meridian thought of her as Black Motherhood personified, and of that great institution she was in terrible awe, comprehending as she did the horror, the narrowing of perspective, for mother and for child, it had invariably meant. (118)

Since life demands such extraordinary sacrifices, sex, which is its cause, is fraught with danger, particularly, in the case of women. Throughout the novel, the role that sex plays in the development of girl-children into women and boy-children into men is at the best static, and at the worst tragic. The body as sensual is almost problematic. Often, but too late, the girls realize that it is through the fecundity of their bodies that their lives can be limited or even ruined. The only worth they find in themselves is that much of their early life is to make their bodies appealing to men, and then to find that the fruits of that appeal come to them before they even realize their lives. Like the seventeen year old Meridian, many girls are dropouts from high schools, divorced wives, and young mothers; like her husband, Eddie, many of the men are destined always to be boys, "fetching and carrying, courteously awaiting orders from someone above" (81).

Just as the body can become the tomb of the mind, the mind's anguish can diminish the body, because these two entities are not separate but one. Violence to one is violence to the other. Mental states, particularly the flaccid bubble of guilt, induce dreams, hallucinations, and visions that in turn affect the body. The guilt that Meridian feels in not living up to her mother's expectation about motherhood is expressed first in her recurring dream of death and then in her neglect of her own body, later in her "blue spells" (148), in her temporary loss of sight, and finally in her occasional bout of paralysis. Her body state reveals her spirit, just as the act of non-violent resistance expresses the spiritual position of the demonstrators.

Since African American women have no choice, they always reach out for the unknown or suffer for guilt; their extreme purity of life is compelled by necessity. So, when they choose, they naturally choose the norm, sometimes with a vengeance that underscores their long years of sufferings. Buttressed by the knowledge that the abyss of hardship is one-half step behind them, many of them galloped to security, gird their loins, starch their homes, and swallow wholesale the feminine mythology from which they have been excluded. Often they find like Meridian's mother, who exchanged sheer hardship for sheer frustration. Before, they know their lives are not their own, they believe that if they improve themselves they would have life, only to find that they are no longer trapped by being outside the norm, but by being inside it. These women feel themselves caught between the heroism of their past and the mundane boredom of their existence. In both cases, either without or within the norm, the common denominator in their lives is their role as mother. Whether they are slave-women for whom "freedom meant that they could keep their own children" (111), or women like Mrs. Hill, who could declare, "I have six children, though I never wanted to have any and I have raised every one myself" (109). The ones for whom these women sacrificed their lives are their children.

Meridian's mother was not adequately informed about the restriction of motherhood; rather she and her daughter are made to believe about its glory. Thus, Meridian's conflict is further exacerbated with the remembrance of her maternal ancestors – mothers who were slaves, and who were often denied their children; mothers who did anything and everything to keep their children. Meridian is tormented by the memory of those slave mothers who had to starve themselves to death to feed their children. She feels that these women have persisted in bringing them up all to a point beyond where she, in her mother's place, her grandmother's place, and her great- grandmother's place, would have stopped.

Little is known to young women about what motherhood really means. They forget or fail to understand that they, not society, will be totally responsible for their children. Further, the history of slave mothers reinforces the idea of sanctification that surrounds African American motherhood. Therefore, they believe that mothers should live a life of sacrifice – a social convention.

Mrs. Hill raises her own children, whom she does not want, and poisons their development by injecting into their minds that they are unwanted. Though Meridian saves her own child from these thorns of guilt, she cannot save herself. Only her mother or a mother figure can save her from her own judgment. But both women are trapped by the myth of motherhood and cannot help each other. The moral choice that Meridian makes saves her child, but not herself. Ironically, although she believes she has sinned against her maternal history, she belongs to it, for she is willing to die on account of her child. Her spiritual degeneration results