

Jan-2015

# Natural Woman, Unnatural Mother: The Convergence of Motherhood and the "Natural" World in Alice Walker's *Meridian*

Sampada Chavan

Follow this and additional works at: <http://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws>

 Part of the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

## Recommended Citation

Chavan, Sampada (2015). Natural Woman, Unnatural Mother: The Convergence of Motherhood and the "Natural" World in Alice Walker's *Meridian*. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 16(2), 188-199.

Available at: <http://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol16/iss2/12>

## **Natural Woman, Unnatural Mother: The Convergence of Motherhood and the “Natural” World in Alice Walker’s *Meridian***

By Sampada Chavan<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

Many cultures around the world equate being womanly to being motherly. However, all women are not physically or psychologically equipped to handle motherhood. What happens to these women who are burdened with motherhood and are unable to deal with it? Alice Walker’s protagonist in her novel *Meridian* is an otherwise accomplished woman, but she fumbles with the notion of ideal woman-ness. Cultural conventions also dictate that women are closer to nature and that motherhood is a “natural” and expected outcome in a woman’s life. While *Meridian* is close to nature, she has no interest in motherhood. This duality in her personality can be explained with the help of ecofeminist criticism. This essay, with the help of ecofeminist theories, analyzes *Meridian*’s natural affinity to nature, and her “unnatural” inclination of being a non-mother.

*Key Words:* Ecofeminism, Nature, Motherhood

### **Introduction**

“The very proximity of the maternal body to ‘natural’ forces often catalyzes antinatural, antimaternal feminisms.”

Stacy Alaimo, *Undomesticated Ground*

In many cultures motherhood is seen as a blessing and an expected outcome of being a woman. Cultural norms force a girl to believe that her body and mind are created to reproduce and motherly qualities come naturally to all female beings in general. While these expectations are universally found, black American women have a history of being the maternal center of families. Dating back to the time of slavery, African American families have functioned with the clearly delineated roles for men and women, due to the fact that the structure of the family was always in a state of flux. In cases where enslaved black men would be sold off to other masters while their wives and children were retained, black women quickly learned that they had to be the glue that held the family together. In such communities with core values of “family-first,” women as mothers were expected to be the crucial link that kept the enslaved community together. Even if the fathers were not a part of the family unit, “women earned for the slave family some security against sale and separation when they had and nurtured children” (White 159), thereby enhancing the value of motherhood in the minds of black women.

---

<sup>1</sup> Sampada Chavan received her PhD from University of Houston and teaches at Houston Community College. She grew up in India and moved to the US for further studies, and she is fascinated by the similarities between the two cultures—especially postcolonial Indian literature and 20th century African American literature.

Being stereotyped in the restrictive and simplistic options of either a Jezebel or Mammy<sup>2</sup>, African American women were also burdened with the idea that they had to become mothers in order to fulfill a notion of ideal womanhood. Writers like Alice Walker, however, attempt to create in their fiction characters that cannot be categorized easily. An example of this can be found in Walker's *Meridian*, where her protagonist, who despite having the biological requirements of becoming a mother, lacks the capacity to enjoy or desire motherhood. Meridian sees herself more than just how society defines her, and she struggles to create for herself a space of her own.

Besides being a woman who rejects the role of herself as a mother in a traditional patriarchal marriage, Meridian is (along with some other women in the novel) also particularly close to nature. It is this duality of rejecting motherhood but feeling closeness to nature that sets Meridian apart from other women who deny the control of patriarchy. Ultimately, characters like Meridian become more fluid subjects and lend themselves to a unique kind of criticism. Because Meridian finds herself being compassionate to wilderness and learns more about humans with the help of nature, an ecofeminist reading of the novel explains Meridian's unique characteristics. However, the presence of nature in Walker's novel is not simplistic and the way the women, especially the protagonist, interact with nature changes throughout the novel. A reading of *Meridian* with the help of ecofeminist theories clarifies the role women wish to play in their society, and it especially helps understand Meridian's negotiation with her life as a mother and an activist. Similar to the trends in ecofeminist theories that grapple with the relationship between nature and women, Meridian and the novel's women are also at odds with their own relationship with nature and their role in society. The central figure, Meridian struggles with her role as a mother and her personal relationship with her natural surroundings, and when she moves away from one, she also moves away from the other, and such a movement is often accompanied with violence.

### **Using Ecofeminism to Understand Meridian's Reluctant Motherhood**

Alice Walker's second novel *Meridian* (1976)<sup>3</sup> is set against the backdrop of the Civil Rights Movement in America. Meridian is from a middle-class African American family in the South. While her youth is spent in playfully discovering her own sexuality, Meridian's life takes a sharp turn when she becomes pregnant before the age of seventeen and marries her son's father. A casual encounter with a group of activists, who are in town to urge people to vote, changes Meridian's future, and a chance to go to college in Atlanta on a scholarship further asserts her life as an activist herself. Her life of activism, however, is filled with challenges as she tries to figure out her role in the movement and in society.

While in college, Meridian displays an affinity to nature and finds respite in her ecological surroundings. Her intimacy to the earth is a quality that has been handed down to her genealogically, and she learns from other women to be in tune with her natural surroundings. By the same token, one imagines that culturally-labeled "feminine" characteristics like motherhood are also handed down in the female lineage, and a girl learns to be a "woman" through her female ancestors. Thereby, the assumption is that a woman is a "natural" mother, i.e. becoming a mother runs in her blood. The word natural here has binary meanings—a characteristic that

---

<sup>2</sup> For more information on these stereotypes, look at Patricia Hill Collins's *Black Feminist Thought* section on "Mammies, Matriarchs, and Other Controlling Images."

<sup>3</sup> Walker's first novel is *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* published in 1970.

typifies nature and an attribute that is native to your being. As far as being a woman is concerned, Meridian fulfills the first category, but does not have the qualities for the second. She is “natural” and has an affinity to nature; however, she is an “unnatural” mother. Simultaneously, Meridian’s disinclination to be a mother also has an effect on her relationship with nature.

The kinship between women and nature is a complicated one, and to better understand the duality in Meridian, we must take a closer look at the history of ecofeminism. Considered by some experts as the third wave of feminism, Noël Sturgeon defines it thusly: “Ecofeminism is a contemporary political movement operating on the theory that the ideologies which authorize injustices based on gender, race, and class are related to the ideologies which sanction the exploitation and degradation of the environment” (260). Thus, women and nature are similar to one another because they are both oppressed by society, and because the two share this similarity, women are closer to nature and understand it much better. Lynn M. Stearney adds that the “ideal of motherhood has been used in the environmental movement to characterize the relationship between the Earth and its inhabitants” (145). She explains this further:

The maternal archetype functions persuasively within the context of ecofeminism through its ability to (1) construct an analogy between women’s role in biological reproduction and the cycles of nature as a premise of women’s greater attunement to the environment; and (2) reinforce the socially created contract that it is women who have the requisite psychological characteristics to “mother,” biologically, emotionally, and environmentally. (151-152)

If we take the above mentioned ecofeminist criticism into consideration, Meridian, nature-loving woman as she is, must also fit the mold of a mother easily. Ecofeminist scholar Carolyn Merchant explains that “Not only was nature in a generalized sense seen as female, but also the earth, or geocosm, was universally viewed as a nurturing mother, sensitive, alive, and responsive to human action” (20-22). This means that nature is qualified as a specific gender, and that gender is then further burdened with the need to have certain characteristics of nurture and nourishment. This results in the blurring of the boundaries between a woman and nature—so nature becomes nourishing and motherly because it is female, and women are expected to be born with mothering qualities because they are just like “mother earth.”

Sherry Ortner, in her seminal essay “Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?” explains that the “pan-cultural second-class status” of women is due to the fact that “women are [...] identified or symbolically associated with nature” (73), whereas men associate themselves with culture. She claims that since culture subordinates nature, men subordinate women, and in turn women are “in general quite satisfied with their position, since it affords them protection and the opportunity to maximize maternal pleasures, which to them are the most satisfying experiences in life” (71). But what about women like Meridian, who do not view motherhood as a “satisfying experience”? Because motherhood is biologically a gender-specific phenomenon, the weight of motherhood often rests on women, and trends in environmental awareness add the weight of ecological responsibility on the women’s shoulders as well. Now, however, critics like Stearney point out that there is an inherent problem caused by this ecofeminist “rhetoric [which] sets up a conceptual framework that has the potential to confuse symbolic and concrete realities in both environmentalism and feminism” (155). She further points out the many issues with regard to forcing the maternal archetype on nature:

The celebration of motherhood as the source of women's attunement to nature and as a feminine universal [...] overemphasizes the place of motherhood in women's lives, and splits off women who are not mothers into a theoretical cul-de-sac. This construction of motherhood additionally promotes an identification of women as exclusively and essentially mothers, thereby diminishing other identities or other roles for women in the environmental movement, or in the world at large. (155)

The natural world and Meridian are intricately bound starting with her name, and Alice Walker provides us with several definitions of the word at the opening of the book:

me.ri.d i.an [...]

1. highest apparent point reached by a heavenly body in its course. [...]
3. noon. [...]
5. in geography, (a) a great circle of the earth passing through the geographical poles and any given point on the earth's surface. [...]
6. (a) a place or situation with its own distinctive character

To add to her "geographical" first name, Meridian's last name is "Hill." While in her first year at college, Meridian has not filled her room with pictures of family, friends, or loved ones; rather her room is filled "with large photographs of trees and rocks and tall hills and floating clouds, which she claimed she *knew*" (27). Like "a place or situation with its own distinctive character," Meridian, the woman, does not fit into a stereotype and is unique.

Environmental literature scholar Charlotte Zoe Walker claims that *Meridian* is one of Alice Walker's greatest works which is often ignored because of her later publications<sup>4</sup>. She calls *Meridian* "one of the few successful literary depictions and explorations of the Civil Rights movement, even as much as its narrative is significantly embedded in nature in varying and sophisticated ways" (44). Because the Civil Rights movement is a major historical event, it becomes the highlight of the novel, and there is a chance that the reader ignores the strong ecofeminist undertones of the novel. Even if the protagonist of *Meridian* does not overtly identify herself with nature, Zoe Walker rightly claims that the novel "seems to be making the point that social justice and the environment are inextricably linked" (44). An argument can be made that Meridian's compassion towards the natural world is the reason why she fights for racial equality.

Both her activism and oneness with nature are qualities that Meridian inherits from her ancestors. Meridian's first revelation of racial inequality comes via her father, who acquires a piece of land from a Native American, works hard to make it plow-able, and wishes to give it back to the "Indians" because he thinks it belongs to them anyway. But before he can do that, the land is acquired by government officials who transform the burial mounds of the Sacred Serpent into a public park, "which [...] was of course not open to Colored [people]" (49). Meridian mourns the loss of the Sacred Serpent mound because her family history is associated with it. Meridian's great-grandmother Feather Mae, "a woman [...] of some slight and harmless madness [...] had fought with her husband to save the snake" (52) when he had decided to flatten the burial mound. Meridian has heard stories of her great-grandmother's closeness to the burial mound:

---

<sup>4</sup> Walker is best known for her critically acclaimed later novel, *The Color Purple* (1982), for which she won the Pulitzer Prize, and the book was also adapted for the big screen (1985) and a Broadway production (2005).

She had liked to go there, Feather Mae had, and sit on the Serpent's back, her long legs dangling while she sucked on a weed stem. She was becoming a woman—this was before she married Meridian's insatiable great-grandfather—and would soon be married, soon be expecting, soon be like her own mother, a strong silent woman who seemed always to be washing or ironing or cooking or rousing her family from naps to go back to work in the fields. Meridian's great-grandmother dreamed, with the sun across her legs and her black, moon-bright face open to the view. (51)

This description of Feather Mae is evocative of a naive woman who has spent her youth drowning herself in her surroundings to escape her inevitable future of marriage and motherhood. The emphasis on maternity is prominent in traditional black families, and Meridian is a part of a lineage of women in her family like her mother Gertrude or her great-grandmother Feather Mae, who have sacrificed their own wishes in order to dedicate themselves to the roles of wife and mother assigned to them by patriarchy. Meridian and her father share this inheritance, this "peculiar madness of her great-grandmother" (53) that urges Meridian to feel the same sense of "ecstasy" that her great-grandmother felt when she revisits the mound:

She was a dot, a speck in creation, alone and hidden. [...] [I]t was in her head that the lightness started. It was as if the walls of earth that enclosed her rushed outward, leveling themselves at a dizzying rate, and then spinning wildly, lifting her out of her body and giving her the feeling of flying. And in this movement she saw the faces of her family, the branches of trees, the wings of birds, the corners of houses, blades of grass and petals of flowers rush toward a central point high above her head and she was drawn with them, as whirling, as bright, as free, as they. (52-53)

This genealogically inherited quality makes Meridian wish to be spiritually one with nature, but an accidental pregnancy soon burdens her with the societal demands of motherhood.

When Meridian gets pregnant at the age of seventeen she marries Eddie, her child's father, only to realize that this life is not perfect for her. When she returns from the hospital and has to care for her baby, Eddie Jr., she finds herself exhausted. When her son cries in the middle of the night, Meridian "lurch[es] toward his crib" and thinks to herself if this "is what slavery is like" (65). Either due to postpartum depression or just plain frustration, Meridian soon begins to fantasize about killing her own son because that would mean she is free again. At the tender age of seventeen, due to the "ball and chain" effect of her son, Meridian realizes that parenthood is a sexist job, where society's expectations of a mother are very different from that of the father:

Eddie went to the restaurant, worked, came home (or did not come home), ate, slept, went off to school in the morning, *as before*. He loved his son, and was good to the child. He bought him the usual stupid presents, showed him off to his parents, took pictures every six weeks and even learned to change the baby's diaper—*though he denied this expertise when his friends came to visit*. [emphasis mine] (66)

Meridian notices that fatherhood is much simpler than motherhood and this is unfair to the mother. She is aware of the fact that while both Eddie and she have become parents, unlike him, she has to give up her education and become a full-time mother. While everyone who comes to visit her and the child assume that she loves him, Eddie has to pretend to be macho and deny his skillfulness with chores like changing diapers. Meridian becomes aware of this duality that Sherry Ortner explains:

[W]oman's body seems to doom her to mere reproduction of life; the male, in contrast, lacking natural creative function, must (or has the opportunity to) assert his creativity externally, "artificially," through the medium of technology and symbols. In so doing, he creates relatively lasting, eternal, transcendent objects, while the woman creates only perishables—human beings. (75)

It is perhaps this realization that makes Meridian wish to be defined as more than just a mother. Her rejection of the traditional role of a mother can also be seen in parallel to the critics' rejection of nature being a nurturing mother. Meridian's pregnancy is unplanned, and while her body is physically capable of bearing a child, she doesn't have the emotional conditioning of a mother. While their closeness to nature can be culturally used against women to allot them a subordinate position, Stacy Alaimo argues that "'nature,' dense with contested meanings, becomes a discursive nexus for feminist attempts to establish agency, self-determination, and reproductive control" (109). Similarly, Meridian attempts to carve a niche for herself, and we see her urge to have an individual impact on the world rather than just being a mother.

But life as a new mother complicates Meridian's kinship with nature and she does not feel about nature the same way she did when she visited the Serpent mound. When she would leave Eddie Jr. at her in-laws' and return home, Meridian would "put her feet up against the windowsill in the back bedroom." In these few moments of quiet and peace, Meridian would stare out the window that looked out into the "small enclosed back yard" and would never see "the pecan trees bending in the wind, or the blue colored sky, or the grass." Instead her mind would be drained and empty, "like the inside of a drum" (71). Alaimo claims that feminist theory attempts "to disentangle 'woman' from the web of associations that bind her to nature," in the process of which "nature is kept at bay—repelled" (4). Similarly, as Meridian internally wishes to remove herself from the role of a mother, she also removes herself from her love of nature.

It is also possible that Meridian's loathing of motherhood is a direct result of her own mother's derision toward her life as a mother. Gertrude Hill is a stellar example of the destructive result of motherhood on a woman's life. Meridian is sensitive to her mother's sense of failure with her own life and is filled with a sense of guilt "for stealing her mother's serenity, for shattering her mother's emerging self" (43). We are told that Mrs. Hill, before she was married, was a well-to-do teacher, and when she got married and had children, it spelled "the beginning of her abstraction":

She discovered she had no interest in children, until they were adults [...] She learned to make paper flowers and prayer pillows from tiny scraps of cloth, because she needed to feel something in her hands. 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. Creativity was in her, but

it was refused expression. It was all deliberate. A war against those to who she could not express her anger or shout, "It's not fair!" (42)

Mrs. Hill has lived a life of suppression because she was "not a woman who should have had children" (40), and because the patriarchal society dictates that since most women's bodies are naturally capable of bearing children, that is the only reason for which they should live. Nagueyalti Warren explains this collective expectation by claiming that "in our society, there is a fundamental expectation that women make others instead of making themselves, and that women naturally want to sacrifice their own freedom in order to nurture children and husbands" (187-188). This leads women to believe that they do not have a choice but to be mothers and wives. What most of them repress is the fact that it is men who are "the primary perpetrator of this myth," who cannot explain the logic behind it, but who know that they must "attribute the behavior to instinct and glorify the maternal role by calling it sacred" (Warren 188). This further compartmentalizes the role of women in society; it does so by muffling their voices and their natural tendencies and affixing them all with the same characteristic. So repressed is Meridian's mother that she even does not bother to complain about anything around her. But because she had an idea about who has caused her to stay in a fixed gender role, "she complained only about her husband, whose faults, she felt, more than made up for her ignorance of whatever faults might exist elsewhere" (76). Mrs. Hill does not understand why she is frustrated, and her feeling of inferiority stems from being aware of the myth of the perfect mother and not being able to live up to that standard. On the other hand, the mother archetype also marginalizes a woman by reminding her that she is inferior to a patriarchal standard, making the situation one that is next to impossible for women to conquer.

A similar argument is made by ecofeminist critics that demand a separation of gender and nature. Mrs. Hill suffers because she does not see herself fit into a pre-created mold, and later Meridian struggles with the same emotions but is personally capable of stepping out of it. The opinion of ecofeminist critic Stacy Alaimo is helpful to understand the angst of Mrs. Hill and Meridian:

In a dauntingly impermeable formulation, woman is not only constituted as nature, but nature is invoked to uphold the propriety of this very constitution [...]. A multitude of feminist demands have been met with the cocksure contention that woman's inferior role is—of course—"natural." The dual meanings of nature converse at the site of woman, fixing her in a vortex of circular arguments: woman is closer to nature and is thus inferior; woman is inferior because nature made her so [...]. Whereas men mark their own transcendent subjectivity by separating themselves from the natural world, women, seen as the embodiment of nature, are doomed to immanence and otherness. (2-3)

Having witnessed her mother's feelings of frustration and emptiness, Meridian begins to experience the same when her identity is narrowed down to that of a mother.

However, for all her unhappiness of this life, Meridian's marriage doesn't fall apart in a "cataclysmic" manner, but rather it happens in a way that "she hardly [notices] it" as Eddie slowly begins to spend more and more nights away from home (68). Eddie's disengagement with his married life produces a typically male reaction from him, as he begins to sleep with other women and assumes that "naturally, the baby would remain with [Meridian] (this was, after all,



how such arrangements had *always* gone), and he did not intend to see much more of either of them” (68). For many men, such removal of self from a marriage and parenthood comes easily, and Eddie is well aware of that. If he is to walk away from his wife and son, it would not be seen as unnatural, either to him or the people around him.

After battling suicidal thoughts and dreams of wanting to kill her son, Meridian gives up Eddie Jr. for adoption and decides to attend Saxon College on a scholarship. Here, although she has promised herself not to have sex, she sleeps with her friend Truman Held and gets pregnant. But she does not tell him that and instead makes her own decision to abort her fetus. By this time, Truman has begun to date a white Jewish woman, and a fellow activist, Lynne Rabinowitz. When Meridian is on her way to get an abortion, she sees Truman and Lynne in a car, and “from a distance, they both look white to her” (118). As a black woman, Truman has, for Meridian, crossed two levels of oppression—he is now, not just a man, but a white man.

Not only does Meridian decide to abort the baby, she also makes the drastic decision to tie her tubes, ensuring that the burden of motherhood can never hang itself on her neck. While she knows that she comes from a long line of women who “continue to face unbearable contradiction, because the conditions of motherhood have often required them—both figuratively and literally—to lay down their lives in an often vain attempt to save their children from overt and covert racial violence” (Stein 91), Meridian conquers her own body by aborting her child and decides to fight racism by other means. Freedom from the burden of motherhood and a reclamation of her own body allow Meridian to “translate her body from a sexual and maternal object into a political agent as she works to repossess southern lands and political rights for the disinherited southern folk” (Stein 108). By choosing a childless life, Meridian gives herself the opportunity to do bigger and better things for her people.

### **Violence and the Sojourner**

While men can indulge in activities that build societies, women are relegated to reproducing. Giving birth and motherhood define the woman’s identity, which in turn forces some to break out of that mold and do something other than just mothering. Sherry Ortner speaks of the inherent bias of these stereotypes where “male activities involving destruction of life [...] are often given more prestige than the female’s ability to give birth, to create life” (75). And while she argues that it is not “the killing that is the relevant and valued aspect” of violence, but rather “the transcendental [...] nature of these activities, as opposed to the naturalness of birth” (75), the women who want to move away from traditional womanly roles can interpret the movement in a violent manner. My claim, then, is that Meridian and the other women in the novel shed their desires to become mothers and in the process also draw themselves away from the natural surroundings that they are associated with, which also results in outward and inward violence.

The two chapters on “The Wild Child” and “Sojourner” depict this movement of the women. The Wild Child is a thirteen year-old homeless girl who lives around the slums surrounding Saxon college. Wile Chile<sup>5</sup>, as the neighbors would call her, is exactly as her name suggests—untamed and savage, who “would be seen scavenging for food in the garbage cans, and when called to, she would run” (23). Wile Chile is compared to being “slipperier than a greased pig” with a “formidable odor” to boot. When Meridian finds out that Wile Chile is pregnant, she thinks of it as a challenge and she decides to take care of her. This nurturing

---

<sup>5</sup> Walker, as well as critics, refer to this character as either “Wild Child” or “Wile Chile.”

characteristic of Meridian is related more to activism than her maternal side, as the first time she hears of Wile Chile is when Meridian is “canvassing for voters in the neighborhood” (24). Like one would hunt down an animal to trap it, Meridian lays down “bits of cake and colored beads and unblemished cigarettes” to tempt Wile Chile and finally manages to capture her. But Wile Chile’s personality is not fit to be caged, and she spends her short time in the campus by shouting obscenities and showing off her uncouth behavior. Although Meridian tries to find her a place to stay, Wile Chile escapes only to be “hit by a speeder and [get] killed” (25). Ecofeminist philosopher Carolyn Merchant explains the two perceptions of nature as a feminine entity: “Central to the organic theory was the identification of nature [...] with a nurturing mother: a kindly beneficent female who provided the needs of mankind in an ordered, planned universe. But another opposing image of nature as female was also prevalent: wild and uncontrollable nature that could render violence” (2). Especially in the case of Wile Chile, Meridian fulfills the image of the beneficent mother, while the chaotic and “uncontrollable nature” of the thirteen year-old results in violence, ending in her own death and the death of her unborn child.

The death of Wile Chile leads the reader to the chapter about the tree called Sojourner<sup>6</sup> that stands prominently at the center of the Saxon college campus. The “largest magnolia tree in the country” (31), the Sojourner becomes an important metaphor in *Meridian*. We are told that the Sojourner was planted by a slave called Louvinie, who could not smile, was not good-looking, and whose only noticeable quality was the ability to spin yarns to entertain the children on the plantation. But one night, Louvinie’s tale of horror resulted in the death of a faint-hearted child, and although it was accidental, the raconteur’s tongue was cut at the root. Louvinie, afraid that without a tongue “the singer in one’s soul was lost forever to grunt and snort through eternity” (34), took her tongue and planted it at the roots of the magnolia tree. Critic Rachel Stein states that “In African traditions, trees were believed to be intermediaries between human and natural worlds... [and] accordingly, the Sojourner tree bridges human and natural worlds and keeps alive Louvinie’s spiritual resistance” (103). In fact, the Sojourner acts as a friend and confidante to the students on the college campus.

The Sojourner stands as a respite for young Saxon college girls who are worried about getting pregnant and jeopardizing their futures. Lynn Pifer opines that “Louvinie and the conjured image of Sojourner Truth serve as positive examples of women who use their tongue as weapons in the struggle for liberation” (4) and are therefore primary locations of relief in the lives of the young Saxon students. So mighty is the Sojourner’s presence in the lives of the young girls that a May Day dance praying for their periods to come brings girls of all races and classes together. The Sojourner, as a figure of support for women and the symbol of the natural world, also has a diabolical history when it became the “only comfort and friend” for a girl called Mary who had a baby secretly and then “carefully chopped the infant into bits and fed it into the commode” (35). After Mary’s crime was discovered she was locked into a room where she hung herself. Mary’s own tale of horror parallels Meridian’s and it hints at the possibility that Meridian’s life could have had a similar devastating end, had she not chosen to let her son get adopted and attend Saxon.

And yet, in spite of its important role in the lives of the students of Saxon College, the Sojourner has a violent end. After the Wild Child is hit by a speeding vehicle and killed, the students of Saxon College come together to give her a respectable burial. But the authorities of

---

<sup>6</sup> The tree is obviously named after Sojourner Truth, the 19<sup>th</sup> century African American women’s right activist and abolitionist, best-known for her speech on racial inequalities, “Ain’t I a Woman?,” delivered in 1851 at the Ohio Women’s Rights Convention.

the college refuse to admit the coffin into the chapel. The students then turn to the Sojourner tree and hold Wile Chile's funeral by the tree that is every girl's friend. Wile Chile's rejection into the chapel affects every girl and they see it as their own, coming together in a poignant moment and singing "We Shall Overcome" over the young girl's coffin. But the peaceful protest does not last for too long, as the aggravation of the girls reaches a peak:

That night, after The Wild Child was buried in an overgrown corner of a local black cemetery, students, including Anne-Marion, rioted on Saxon campus for the first time in its long, placid, impeccable history, and the only thing they managed to destroy was The Sojourner. Though Meridian begged them to dismantle the president's house instead, in a fury of confusion and frustration they worked all night, and chopped and sawed down, level to the ground, that mighty, ancient, sheltering music tree. (38-39)

The closeness that these girls feel to the tree and the comfort they get from its history results in violence toward it rather than against it. With this misdirected violence, Walker "seems to remind us that the relationship between women and nature is not simple, that women, like men, can react to oppression by turning their anger against that which they love, rather than against the oppressor" (Zoe Walker 47). Alaimo claims that "If woman's perceived proximity to nature is responsible for her oppression, then liberation, it would seem, is contingent on her distance from nature" (3-4). This could also explain why destroying the tree makes the women believe that they can get freedom from the oppressive authorities. The women identify with the tree, and it is a reminder of their closeness to the natural world; but now it also becomes a burden to them and seems oppressive in itself. By destroying it, the young women may believe they have moved away from nature, and hence moved away from oppression.

Meridian, who is inherently opposed to violence, begs the students to do differently. Instead, she directs this angst unconsciously to her internal self. Over the time that she spends as a student in Saxon college and even later, Meridian's health slowly begins to dwindle. The life of activism begins to have an effect on her and slowly she "[values] her body less, [attends] to it less" (97). She begins to lose her hair and even her vision sometimes blurs. The ecstasy that Meridian has previously experienced at the Serpent mound, she now experiences with bouts of paralysis that leave her with "astonished joy" instead of fear. Lying in bed and removed from nature, she "felt as if a warm, strong light bore her up and that she was a beloved part of the universe; that she was innocent even as the rocks are innocent, and unpolluted as the first waters" (124). This unexplained sickness happens at a point of time in Meridian's life where she is not particularly in touch with nature and has moved away from it just like she has moved away from her maternal life. The internally directed violence could be her mind's attempt to cope with her inability to fit with the traditional maternal role and the savage nature of activism.

### **Finding an Alternate Identity**

Lynn Stearney believes that ecofeminism burdens women to have "an appropriate maternal attitude" with which we must care for nature. However, she asserts that "Environmental responsibility is gender-neutral" (156). Sherry Ortner also argues that in spite of woman's inherent closeness to nature, woman's "participation in culture are recognized by culture and cannot be denied." She urges the reader to notice that woman "is seen to occupy an intermediate

position between culture and nature” (84). Meridian embodies this intermediate role by transforming into a person that lies halfway between man and woman. As she becomes more and more drawn into the movement, with her rejection of the stereotypical roles of womanhood, she slowly starts moving towards a more gender-neutral body. Towards the end of Walker’s novel when Meridian enters a prison, the inmates are confused by her androgynous appearance and wonder to themselves: “Who was that person? That man/woman person with a shaved part in close-cut hair? A man’s blunt face and thighs, a woman’s breasts?” (233). Because she has refused to depend on any male figure, and is single, she has also forced her mind and body into masculinity. While societal expectations for most women are delineated with motherhood, Meridian tries to cross the gender line by shedding the “feminine” role carved by society. Meridian’s tying of her tubes is a willful act through which she sends a message to society that she does not want to be treated as only a female capable of reproducing.

Descriptions of the protagonist also remind the reader that she struggles against patriarchy and gender stereotypes. Susan Danielson describes Meridian as someone whose “early pregnancy, marriage and separation from husband are filled with details of a young girl unable or unwilling to adjust to the roles delineated for her by her community” (319). Meridian’s standing as a poor, black woman helps her to succeed in her struggle; she is a part of the group of activist women who “begin this political activism as advocates for African-Americans, the poor, or, less frequently, women,” and with their position as “one of the few groups negatively affected by multiple forms of oppression, African-American women have” a better chance at seeing the interrelationships of these struggles (Hill Collins 217).

As a woman who has accepted her inability to commit violence, Meridian does direct her violence inward with her paralysis and figuratively kills her maternal self with abortion. Meridian further underlines her non-conformity to the usual “feminine” expectations and completes her transformation; she leaves Truman behind and goes off looking for more challenges as an activist. Although the book does not end with a brilliant sense of hope, it signifies the continuation of a woman’s journey to reach a place where she is free from the bonds of gender stereotypes. Meridian ensures her neutrality of gender by giving up on her role as a mother and rebels for a better place for herself within society. Meridian, in her own non-conformist ways, opens the doors to a better understanding of women, whose identities go beyond being mothers.

## Works Cited

- Alaimo, Stacy. *Undomesticated Ground: Recasting Nature as Feminist Space*. Cornell UP: Ithaca, 2000. Print.
- Danielson, Susan. "Alice Walker's *Meridian*, feminism, and the 'Movement.'" *Women's Studies* 16 (1989): 317-330. Web.
- Hill Collins, Patricia. *Black Feminist Thought*. 2nd edition. New York: Routledge, 2000. Print.
- Merchant, Carolyn. *The Death of Nature*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980. Print.
- Ortner, Sherry. "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?" *Woman, Culture, and Society*. Eds. M. Z. Rosaldo and L. Lamphere. Stanford UP: Stanford, CA, 1974. 67-87.
- Pifer, Lynn. "Coming to Voice in Alice Walker's *Meridian*: Speaking Out for the Revolution." *African American Review* 26.1 (1992): 77-88. Web.
- Sturgeon, Noël. "The Nature of Race: Discourses of Racial Difference in Ecofeminism.:" *Ecofeminism: Women, Culture, Nature*. Ed. Karen Warren. Indiana UP: Indiana 1997. 260-278. Web.
- Stearney, Lynn M. "Feminism, Ecofeminism, and the Maternal Archetype: Motherhood as a Feminine Universal." *Communication Quarterly* 42.2 (1994): 145-159. Web.
- Stein, Rachel. "Returning to the Sacred Tree: Black Women, Nature, and Political Resistance in Alice Walker's *Meridian*." *Shifting the Ground*. Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1997. 84-113. Print.
- Walker, Alice. *Meridian*. Harcourt: Orlando, 2003. Print.
- Walker, Charlotte Zoe. "A Saintly Reading of Nature's Text: Alice Walker's *Meridian*." *Bucknell Review* 44.1 (2000): 43-55. Web.
- Warren, Nagueyalti. "Resistant Mothers in Alice Walker's *Meridian* and Tina McElroy Ansa's *Ugly Ways*." *Southern Mothers: Fact and Fiction in Southern Women's Writing*. Eds. Nagueyalti Warren and Sally Wolff. Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1999. Web.
- White, Deborah Gray. *Ar'n't I a Woman?* New York: W.W. Norton, 1999. Print.