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Woman Seeking Mother: The Heroine's Journey in *Waslala* by Gioconda Belli

Karisa Saori Shiraki

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

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Master of Arts

Motherhood and maternity are common themes in Nicaraguan author Gioconda Belli's (1948–) writings, but in *Waslala* (2006) her exploration of the mother figure dives further into what a relationship with such a figure provides. Through a development narrative, parallel to that of female Bildungsroman and quest-romance, the protagonist, Melisandra, grows in maternal history and culture in her search for mother. This thesis uses the theories of Carol Christ, Dana Heller, Joseph Campbell and others to see Melisandra's odyssey through the lens of a quest narrative. Along this journey, two maternal figures play an important role in preparing her for her climactic reunion with her own biological mother. They both teach and give examples of female strength and authority that Melisandra then emulates. As Melisandra discovers and forms her own identity, she finds herself in a pivotal position that intertwines her quest with that of her community's. Upon leaving the utopian Waslala where she meets her mother, it becomes apparent that the mother has become central for both Melisandra's personal identity and that of her community. Ultimately, the trajectory of Melisandra's journey shows the archetype and figure of the mother as paramount for growth, development, and self-actualization.

Keywords: Gioconda Belli, female quest, Bildungsroman, mother, maternal culture, identity

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Introduction

Arguably the most celebrated contemporary Nicaraguan author, Gioconda Belli (1948–) consistently publishes narratives based on a woman’s experience. A published poet, novelist, and journalist, her oeuvre spans the crucial topics of ecocriticism, nation, and feminism. Belli’s relationship with such themes interweaves with her heavy participation in revolutionary and political movements in Nicaragua. In an interview conducted by Ángela Barraza for the Chilean news publication *El Ciudadano*, Belli describes the purpose of her writing: “yo creo que mi mayor militancia es mi literatura, porque yo me pongo a pensar en cómo me cambió la vida a mí el leer los libros que leí. ...[Y]o siento que con la literatura he logrado abrir perspectivas y hacerles ver a las mujeres, sobre todo, su propia fuerza y el amar realmente el hecho de ser mujeres y eso para mí ha sido una buena militancia.” Much of her experience as a woman and a revolutionary bleeds into her novels and poetry, recognizing that her words have the power to aid women in discovering the strength and beauty of womanhood. Pilar Moyano additionally observes that Belli’s writing involves ideas of “inventing and altering myths relating to women and nation; by transforming the female image from passive to active; by correcting, in summary, the powerful gender stereotypes that exist in our culture” (91). Belli’s ability to bring these important discussions into the literary world and place women at the forefront has facilitated the lasting love and readership of her novels.

Originally published in 1996, Belli’s third novel, *Waslala: Memorial del futuro*, weaves the timely themes of nation and woman in one woman’s quest to find the legendary utopia, Waslala. When a group of travelers arrives at Melisandra’s hacienda, they invite her to join in their journey to find this utopia. Together, they travel down river until stopping in Cineria, a major city filled with trash and technological waste from around the world. In Cineria,

Melisandra meets Engracia, a social leader, who plans a coup that leads to the assassination of Damián and Antonio Espada, dictators who have perpetuated the ruined state of the fictional country, Faguas. Free of their dictatorial rule, Faguas finds itself in a state of transition.

Melisandra stays behind to help reconstruct her community, but ultimately decides that she must find Waslala in order to help Faguas. Upon entering Waslala, she meets her long-lost mother, and, before leaving, receives the memorial of Waslala from her. Re-published in 2006 with Seix Barral, the edition that will be used in this analysis, Belli added notable changes to her novel and a new subtitle featured on the new edition's cover: "La búsqueda de una civilización perdida."¹ Even if this change was proposed by the publishing house, the newly featured subtitle refocuses the narrative on the protagonist's search. Melisandra's quest reveals itself as more than just the stereotypical search for utopia;² it becomes a quest for Mother.

While the topic of Mother has been extensively explored in Belli's poetry and prose, this study expands on the definition of Mother and focuses on her symbolic power and the matriarchal network.³ Chronologically following the trajectory of the narrative, I will show how Melisandra builds her matriarchal network along the different phases of her quest. Leaning on Dana Heller's explanation of feminine call to quest, the absence of a mother figure is shown to be an impetus for Melisandra's journey out of the hacienda towards Waslala. Her grandmother

¹ Some changes Belli has made to the 2006 edition include an epilogue and removing some fantastical descriptions along Melisandra's journey. While the book's cover has changed with the later edition, the title page of the book remains *Waslala: Memorial del futuro*.

² As described in the first epigraph: "UTOPIA: Palabra creada por Tomás Moro, del prefijo griego: "ou": no y "topos": lugar. Literalmente: "lugar que no es"" (9). Throughout the novel, Waslala is referred to as a utopia (Belli 30, 331). Utopia is the ideal society, the dream of all Faguasenses. Utopia is used here to describe the Faguasenses' perspective of Waslala.

³ Laura Barbas Rhoden provides a comprehensive analysis of Mother in Belli's work in her article "The Quest for Mother in the Novels of Gioconda Belli." "Huérfanas y otras sin madre" by Barbara Dröscher is a comparative analysis of two of Belli's works, *Sofía de los Presagios* and *Waslala*, to other female Central American authors. Pilar Moyano also addresses the topic of Mother in Belli's poetry in a chapter entitled "The Transformation of Nation and Womanhood: Revisionist Mythmaking in the Poetry of Nicaragua's Gioconda Belli" of the book *Interventions: Feminist Dialogues in Third World Women's Literature and Film* edited by Bishnupriya Ghosh and Brinda Bose.

and Engracia serve as a foundation for Melisandra's understanding of maternal history and culture. Engracia, acting as spiritual mother and mentor, helps Melisandra learn and practice social activism. This all leads to the completion of a social and spiritual quest, as theorized by Carol Christ, culminated by Melisandra reuniting with her mother in Waslala. When they reunite, the mother transforms into a universal mother who is essential for both Melisandra and the nation of Faguas. Finally, analogous to the hero's return detailed by Joseph Campbell, Melisandra demonstrates her personal growth and, through it, the developmental significance of the matriarchal network.

Although Melisandra learns much of maternal history and culture from her grandmother and Engracia, two members of her matriarchal network, the mother emerges as key to constructing personal identity and recognizing female authority and power.

Critical Studies on Quest and Bildungsroman

Embedded within the search for Mother is an implicit tale of growth and development, a novel of learning that is emblematic of the Bildungsroman genre. In his book *Reading the Modernist Bildungsroman*, Gregory Castle offers a definition of the classic Bildungsroman: "the young heroes of nineteenth-century Bildungsromane must overcome and master in order to enact the drama of socialization. Thus, the hero's conflict with social authority ultimately leads to an affirmation of that authority in the social sphere and in the choice of a vocation" (8). The narrative strongly follows a pattern of conformity to hierarchical authority, ultimately concluding with the moral that "social maturity involves knowing one's limits and accepting one's place in the order of things" (Castle 8-9). Due to this narrative of conformity that has come to mark the classic Bildungsroman, Annis Pratt in *Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction* has affirmed that

the classic Bildungsroman as applied to a feminine narrative is “growing down” instead of “growing up” (14). If in the classic Bildungsroman the male protagonist must conform to what society expects of him, the female protagonist then must, by the same token, conform to those self-same patriarchal norms that, in turn, restrict both her movements and actions. In other words, the act of conformity (through either death or matrimony) after rebellion is definitively not progress but regression for the female protagonist. Nevertheless, theorists like Stella Bolaki reveal that the contemporary female Bildungsroman refutes the patriarchal norm of its classic iteration in redefining and expanding our idea of female identity.

Likewise, the specific task of finding Mother and Waslala aligns Melisandra’s journey with quest romance. Dana Heller, in her book *The Feminization of Quest-Romance*, lays out the skeletal structure of female quest: “Questing, a woman dares to reinvent herself. Unfamiliar, indiscreet, she “lights out” into strange continents, collecting out of the darkness stories never heard before” (1). Under the guise of accomplishing a particular task, a woman’s quest is, ultimately, a quest to find oneself. She ventures outside of the home, her traditional space, to reinvent her conception of herself and womanhood. Through this lens, Melisandra’s journey and development draws characteristics from both Bildungsroman and quest, most especially the theorized female/feminine iterations of both. Bolaki further explores the intersection between female quest and female Bildungsroman, describing patterns in contemporary narratives:

Female authors of quest romances, a proxy for the *Bildungsroman*...reaffirm the need for emotional connection and affiliation, which accounts of rugged individualism dismiss or disguise. By illuminating, in particular, the ways in which the separation from the Mother can be traumatic in female novels of development, contemporary women writers seem

also to acknowledge recent psychoanalytic theories that stress women's relational identity. (43)⁴

For this reason, the feminine Bildungsroman that contemporary female authors create no longer depends on an individual's conformity to society, but on the need to seek and construct identity through relationships that are essential to the development of a woman. In this, the existing society is no longer of the utmost importance but rather the society that the protagonist creates for herself via her devised matriarchal network.⁵

In addition to Dana Heller's theory, I will utilize Janet Pérez's analysis of feminized quest-romance to better understand the physical journey Melisandra undertakes. Carol Christ's theory expands on the facets of a woman's journey through the lens of social and spiritual quest. These two quests underscore Melisandra's development as a heroine. Lastly, through Carl Jung and Joseph Campbell's study of archetypes, the mother-daughter reunion at the climax of this novel achieves greater depth. Additionally, Campbell's seminal theory of the hero's journey will be used to understand Melisandra's triumphant return to society as a heroic return.

Call to Adventure: Leaving Home and Family

At the start of the novel, Melisandra ostensibly leaves her home and grandfather in search of Waslala. Waslala is the utopian legend that the people of Faguas dream of and hope for.

⁴ Janet Pérez adds to this, "many a feminine Bildungsroman would also qualify as (internalized) quest-romance. Woman's autobiographies and/or autobiographical novels are fundamentally connected to the quest-romance by the search for identity, the inquiry into the origins of selfhood, the autobiographical journey" (85–86).

⁵ The matriarchal network is comparable to any patriarchal system constructed to support a male's success. This matriarchal network consists of mother figures, female relatives, friends, mentors, and sisters who build solidarity through teaching maternal history and culture.

Waslala, however, represents so much more than a utopia; to the protagonist, it is the place that her parents chose over her.⁶ For a long time, Melisandra had felt a need to embark on this journey towards Waslala, more than anything because she deeply felt the loss of her progenitors who had left her when she was only three years old. At the beginning of the book, Melisandra expresses this pain to her grandfather, “yo todavía no he logrado sentir a mi mamá. Mis sábanas siempre están frías” (36). Melisandra experiences suffering and distress caused by maternal separation at such a young and tender age, manifest at her most vulnerable—asleep and at night. This longing persists until she is about to arrive at her desired destination, Waslala. Shortly before, Melisandra finds herself “agazapada contra Raphael, pensándolo su madre” (305). Although her sheets are not cold this time, she still finds herself so desperate for the maternal connection that she seeks this maternal heat in her partner, awaking “emociones atávicas, vacíos, hambre de pecho y abrazo maternales. Sentía como nunca antes la ausencia maternal, una punzante sensación física en el ombligo” (305). Close to the end of her maternal search, Melisandra comes to demonstrate physical symptoms, the most telling of which a sharp pain in her navel. This ache serves a reminder of the maternal alimentation she has lacked since childhood; she longs for the most primitive connections between Mother and child: breast and umbilical cord. The emotional need for Mother becomes a relentless physical need as her journey draws closer to its climax. The nearer she comes to Waslala, the more intense these pains become, the absence clearer and more prominent than ever, as Melisandra instinctually knows that she is closer to reuniting with the Mother.

⁶ Waslala is rooted in Melisandra’s genealogy. Not only did her parents abandon her in pursuit of Waslala, but her grandfather was one of the principal founders. A cycle of abandonment repeats itself in her family history as don José left behind María when he set up Waslala’s initial community.

Melisandra's call to journey, as we might call it, was the ancient desire to once again feel maternal heat. As Bolaki explained, Melisandra's tale of development manifests as a quest-romance, catalyzed by maternal absence. Janet Pérez, in her theory of feminized quest-romance, furthers shows the impact of parental departure, calling it "an early experience of abandonment, abuse or injustice that serves to initiate or explain the protagonist's call to the quest, her need for self-affirmation and self-redemption" (Pérez 42). Melisandra not only seeks to find the legendary Waslala, but journeys to find her mother and, ultimately, a sense of self. To this end, Dana Heller adds: "The female hero who lacks a mother may explore women's lack of authority in the paternal sphere. She may rediscover maternal history and culture through the course of psychoanalysis, female bonding, or social activism" (29). Only through learning maternal history and culture can she, in turn, learn more about her identity as a woman in a patriarchal society. In her dwelling near the river, Melisandra lived in a paternal sphere, accompanied by men and women who conform to the patriarchal status quo. While her relationship with her grandfather is sweet and warm, Melisandra's relationship with Joaquín demonstrates the pervasive paternal power entrenched in the quotidian hacienda lifestyle. Despite their sexually intimate relationship, Joaquín recognizes a certain paternalistic bond between him and Melisandra: "Podría ser su padre. La vio crecer... Él aceptaba que su amor rayaba en el incesto. No sabía si la quería como hija o amante" (Belli 33). In the moment that he consensually physically crosses over to the incestuous, Joaquín admonishes her: "Sólo yo te sé domar, Melisandra" (34). This paternal and patriarchal environment or sphere in which she grew up took from her the authority that she otherwise would have possessed. Perceiving the patriarchal environment she is subject to as a woman and, more importantly, the absence of a matriarchal network, she thus ventures to seek both maternal models and her own version of authority.

Melisandra's grandmother was capable of navigating that patriarchal environment. Throughout the narrative, multiple characters fondly remember her grandmother as a force of nature who was not held down by traditional norms. In fact, when Melisandra decides that the time has come to leave and seek Waslala, don José, her grandfather, asks her: "¿Te conté de la vez que [tu abuela] cazó un jaguar cerca de aquí? Ella sola. Amarró el animal al jeep y lo arrastró por el camino. Me parece que la estoy viendo aparecer de madrugada; roja como una leona, los chavalos siguiéndola para ver el jaguar muerto. Con los dientes le hizo un collar a tu mamá. ¡Qué mujeres, ustedes! ¡Qué va a poder hacer uno!" (40–41). With awe, don José tells Melisandra that she is just like her incredible ancestor. This anecdote reminds Melisandra of the strength of her grandmother, a woman capable of killing one of nature's most ferocious predators by herself. Everyone remembers María, the grandmother, as such: a powerful woman with great force and little fear. Nevertheless, since she passed away, Melisandra not only feels bereft of an example of feminine authority in the paternal sphere in which she was raised, but also of her own maternal ancestry. Don José bestows a gift on Melisandra before she embarks on her quest: he gives her a memory, explains her maternal lineage, speaking of the strength of her grandmother. Furthermore, through the image of the necklace, he reminds her that doña María had passed down her strength and power to her mother, and that same strength and power can now be passed down to Melisandra. This maternal history is special because not only does it talk about the missing maternal link between Melisandra and her mother, but also about the shadow of her grandmother that acts as a specter that follows her throughout her odyssey.

The grandmother is a beautiful shadow that reminds Melisandra that she is not the first nor is she the last to seek and to find. This specter allows Melisandra to reconstruct her maternal lineage and devise her own genealogical matriarchal network. María, the grandmother, is

introduced through an introspective memory of a personal practice with roots in her Germanic heritage: “Recordó la ceremonia vespertina de su abuela María: al atardecer, religiosamente hacía un alto en su trabajo, se quitaba la gorra de béisbol o el sombrero de paja, para descubrirse respetuosamente ante el sol crepuscular en un rito de valkiria que le vendría quizás de sus abuelos alemanes” (21). Through this spiritual observance, Melisandra remembers the maternal culture that her grandmother preserved and performed for her. Upon leaving, Melisandra then invokes her grandmother, “Rogó al espíritu de su abuela que los protegiera” (69). Recognizing the divine authority of her grandmother and placing stock in her goddess-like strength, Melisandra commends the hacienda to her grandmother, trusting in her maternal genealogy that she will be able to complete her quest. This culture sets the foundation for her own matriarchal network; her memory and sense of history push her to seek more, to expand her network and learn more of her own authority.

Engracia, Mentor in Social and Spiritual Quest

Melisandra’s journey of development can only begin when she ventures outside of the stagnant paternal sphere, a space where she could not have grown more. Throughout her journey, she begins to rediscover her maternal history through a relationship with a substitute mother and with social activism. Once *tierra adentro*,⁷ Melisandra meets Engracia, a powerful leader who guides both the people of Cineria and Melisandra. Her position as Melisandra’s spiritual mother is cemented by her ability to navigate and maintain a position of authority in an inundated patriarchal sphere. From the beginning, Engracia is set apart by her deviation from the image of a traditional and domestic woman: “Sus manos y pies eran también imposiblemente largos.

⁷ The novel is divided into four sections: “Viajeros en el río,” “Río arriba,” “Tierra adentro,” and “Waslala.” These sections are reflective of the different stages of Melisandra’s quest.

Contaba que su madre, desde que ella era adolescente, tuvo que prohibirle entrar a la cocina porque quebraba cacharros a diestra y siniestra” (120). Engracia has never quite fit the classic mold of a woman, too big for the traditional kitchen space. Her physical enormity parallels her spiritual enormity, a figure that eclipses whatever spaces the patriarchy would have her occupy. Although unable to function in the traditional domestic role, Engracia still is able to transform into a “Diosa Antigua, terrible y magnánima” as much for Melisandra as for the people of Faguas (187). Equating her with a goddess and “una amazona mítica” demonstrates how much of maternal culture she was able to share with Melisandra (255). Her authority and the divine power passed down from female to female serve to teach Melisandra all that she can be capable of as well.

Through her example, Engracia becomes an integral part of Melisandra’s matriarchal network. More than just giving her an example of how to claim her own authority, Engracia also extends a hand in solidarity. She uplifts Melisandra and “inmediatamente Engracia se convierte en protectora de Melisandra, ayudándola en su viaje de búsqueda de Waslala, y guiándola en la peligrosa negociación con los Espada” (Lago Graña 77). Engracia becomes Melisandra’s protector, giving her help and guidance. Perhaps because Engracia recognizes herself in Melisandra or because of the love she felt for her grandfather, don José, she gives Melisandra her words and dreams: “Cualquiera sea tu juicio, no quisiera terminar sin darte el mío.... Por Waslala conocí lo inefable que es tener fe, creer en las inmensas posibilidades del ser humano y participar en la realización de sueños impracticables, tiernos y descomunales” (286). Engracia stresses the importance of Waslala, its utopian symbolism, and the absolute urgency to seek and find it. More importantly, in closing her letter, Engracia entrusts her loved ones to Melisandra: “Cuidame a mis muchachos, a tu abuelo, a Faguas” (287). Engracia, like many other

Faguasenses, held the firm belief that Melisandra would be the one to find Waslala and bring back “la capacidad de imaginar lo imposible...la única salvación de nuestra especie” (287). She chooses to mentor Melisandra because she sees in her the possibility of change and growth for her beloved community.

Engracia, as mentor, guide, and maternal figure, is the key for Melisandra’s quest. In planning her death and the destruction of the Espada brothers, Engracia recognizes that this act will be “una señal inequívoca...de que el camino a Waslala ha quedado abierto” (206). Engracia contrasts with the Espada brothers, the dictators who control and oppress everything in Faguas; she is their primary enemy.⁸ She is against everything that the Espadas do, even what these two parties represent to Faguas are at odds with each other: “Identificaban a los Espada con el nacionalismo y a Engracia con la noción de formar una comunidad abierta al mundo” (175). Perhaps their most telling difference, however, is in their attitude and belief about Waslala. The Espada brothers are the greatest detractors of the dream and fulfillment of Waslala in Faguas, Antonio Espada commenting, “¿Cómo no va a querer la gente creer en un lugar encantado, sin conflictos ni contradicciones? En un país maldito como éste, es una noción irresistible. Sólo que es mentira. La única verdad posible, la única certeza, es tener poder” (170). The Espada brothers have done everything to deter and minimize the influence of this utopia in Faguas. They firmly believe that the only truth is power, and they have used that philosophy to bring the nation of Faguas to its knees. They recognize that the hope that Waslala brings to Faguas diminishes their control. Thus, for Melisandra to arrive at Waslala and save Faguas, Engracia would have to terminate the Espada brothers.

⁸ Their names bring another point of comparison: phonetically their names sound similar, but the images they evoke are contradictory. The surname Espada recalls the phallic symbol of patriarchal power, the sword. Engracia, on the other hand, conjures emotions of mercy and grace.

Engracia's plan to do so was to blow them up, using her and her allies' bodies as a vehicle for destruction. When she formed this plan, Engracia had already consigned herself to death—there was no other possible ending for her or her beloved comrades. Painting herself with Cesium 137⁹ gave her the supernatural power to end not just her own life but also those lives that tormented Faguas. Recognizing the potent and supernatural beauty Cesium 137 added to Engracia, her partner Morris calls her “una Medusa mítica” not once, but twice (184). Possibly invoking a known mythic figure to highlight Engracia's destructive scheme, Morris also subliminally highlights creative power through this observation: “Medusa is an important archetype of feminine creativity, especially when this creativity is thwarted” (Pratt, *Dancing with Goddesses* 40). In contemplating her plan, Engracia simultaneously reflects on her barren life and imagines what will happen: “su sexo volaría hecho pedazos, se dispersaría el oscuro testimonio de sus placeres, el surtidor del que fluyó vida, ya que no hijos. «¡Waslala!», suspiró” (254). In conjunction with the Medusa archetype, Engracia embraces the creative power given to her through the planned suicide bombing. The focus on her sex dispersing in a culminating revolutionary act gives life to a new Faguas that Engracia knows will be found through Waslala. She willingly surrenders her body and, more precisely, her creative center. Her zeal transforms her image: “Engracia personificaba el poder telúrico de una tormenta eléctrica y el oscuro misterio del vientre femenino. Lucía mayéctica y evocó en todos el dolor por la madre” (Belli 256). With this transformation, her body shows all the divine power of the feminine. Through this power, her womb and the evocation of Mother, in Annis Pratt's terms, she “[completes] a painful quest to understand and forgive Medusa; only by looking into her eyes and understanding

⁹ Morris further explains its dangers and effects: “Es un isótopo radioactivo. La dosis letal varía entre 500 y 600 rems. Calculo que cada uno de ustedes debe haber recibido al menos eso. Se van a poner muy enfermos. En unas cuantas horas sufrirán de vómitos, fiebre, dolor de cabeza, quemaduras, la piel les arderá. Perderán fluido y electrólitos en los espacios intercelulares, sufrirán daños a la médula espinal, se les caerá el pelo...” (185–186).

what lies beneath them can we enter the healing seas of the unconscious from which rebirth is possible” (*Dancing with Goddesses* 41). “Engracia, la Medusa” unlocks the gates to Waslala and, by doing so, enables Faguas’ rebirth (Belli 185). She truly becomes savior, goddess of Cineria, of Faguas, the one who gave her body and her life so that life could once again flow in Faguas.

Engracia’s divine act additionally gives space for Melisandra to taste maternal culture through social activism. Through this activism, her desire to help the people of Cineria, the orphans in Timbú, and all of Faguas, that Melisandra begins to approximate a wholeness that she had never felt because of maternal absence: “Nunca me sentí más feliz, a pesar de la tragedia que nos circundaba, que durante los días en Cineria, después de la explosión. Percibí mi utilidad, mi contribución, el sentido que esto daría a mi vida” (335). As such, Melisandra’s journey develops around the concepts of social and spiritual quest introduced by Carol Christ. Christ explains that social quest “concerns women’s struggle to gain respect, equality, and freedom in society—in work, in politics, and in relationships with women, men, and children. In the social quest a woman begins in alienation from the human community and seeks new modes of relationship and action in society” (8).¹⁰ Much of Melisandra’s journey is dependent on the new relationships that she forms which inform her ability to act in the human community. Cineria and Faguas’ transitional stage gives her a space to gain respect, to build relationships, and to, ultimately, find her own authority in society: “Melisandra estaba como pez en el agua: contestaba preguntas, sugería, interrogaba a su vez, los retaba a usar su ingenio. Hablaba desde lo alto de una silla que alguien situara en el centro de la glorieta. Hacia ella se volvían todos los ojos” (277). In this new

¹⁰ The notion of alienation from the human community is more subtle in Melisandra’s case. She was liked by all in her hacienda. However, the hacienda itself is presented as a rural community, just at the gateway before entering the heart and hubbub of Faguas. Moreover, until joining Raphael and others to seek Waslala, Melisandra has not traveled past her hacienda and throughout her travels we see her able to form deeper and more mature relationships.

position, Melisandra is in her element, like a fish to water, stretching herself to take on a bigger role, connecting with and leading her community.

As Melisandra demonstrates, the concept of social quest is similar to classic Bildungsroman in that a woman seeks her own space in society. Contrary to what Pratt has posited of the classic Bildungsroman, the social quest of a woman does not necessarily have to finish with a “growing down,” with the heroine conforming to what society stereotypically expects of her. Melisandra’s journey shows this pattern of seeking one’s own space and seeking harmony with society. There is a duality to Melisandra’s version of society. She “conforms” to the community that she herself has created through this quest, a society built upon maternal culture, taught to her by the women in her matriarchal network. Additionally, the society that she returns to after finding Waslala is different from the one she had left. Even after Engracia’s revolutionary act, Faguas is not the same as it was when she first embarked on her quest: “Faguas era un pequeño país de plastilina donde todo estaba todavía por hacerse” (Belli 278). Moreover, what occurs in this story is not conformity to the oppressiveness of the patriarchal sphere, but rather to the hopeful expectations of the people of Faguas. Melisandra does not return to life as it was at the start of the novel, but conforms to the hope that her fellow community place in her.

Melisandra and Reconstruction

Melisandra’s place in society is the heroine or, in her words, the character who will complete a journey of learning and growth for all of Faguas, for all of society, for “un grupo humano rehaciéndose, reinventando su existencia” (293). Faguas’ newly transitional stage at first gives her pause before continuing with her journey. Perhaps she felt she had reached the zenith

of her quest or she was simply deterred by seeing her community in such a condition: “Por primera vez en su vida se preguntó si realmente Waslala podría resolver los dilemas que enfrentaban, la tarea que tenían por delante. Le parecía más urgente dedicarse a lo concreto” (279). Then, focusing on her newfound authority, she questions, “¿Temía acaso ser desplazada, regresar y encontrar que ya no era necesaria? Soy estúpida, se dijo frente al espejo. ¡Qué más daba si era ella, otra u otro quien tomaba las riendas!” (279–80). And yet it is after reading Engracia’s letter that she is once again galvanized to finish her quest toward Waslala. When she finishes, Melisandra finds that “El ansia de Waslala renació en su mente” (288). Recalling her initial desire to reunite with her mother in that utopia, she exclaims “¡Engracia, Engracia, Engracia, la utopía, la madre reencontrada y perdida otra vez!” (288). As with the start of her quest, it takes another mother figure to push her to continue, to keep seeking, to keep hoping. Stepping away from herself, Melisandra also perceives the pivotal role that she plays for the Faguasenses: “Sintió que hombres y mujeres despedían en ella a la portadora de sus esperanzas, una suerte de personaje mitológico a punto de iniciar en nombre de todos una jornada heroica llena de pruebas, acertijos y trampas” (290). With this, her role in society has evolved to be more than post-conflict facilitator; she is now the keystone for Faguas’ progress and growth.

The success of Melisandra’s personal social quest is an essential part of her spiritual quest. A recognition of her fulfillment of the social quest enables an understanding of the bigger picture of the spiritual quest. According to Carol Christ’s theory, the definition of a spiritual quest is the following:

women’s *spiritual quest* concerns a woman’s awakening to the depths of her soul and her position in the universe. A woman’s spiritual quest includes moments of solitary contemplation, but it is strengthened by being shared. It involves asking basic questions:

Who am I? Why am I here? What is my place in the universe? In answering these questions, a woman must listen to her own voice and come to terms with her own experience. (8–9)

Looking beyond society and even beyond the matriarchal network that Melisandra forms, this spiritual quest pushes her to seek her own place in the universe, to find her role beyond the small circle she had imagined in the social quest. Before leaving Cineria to once again start her quest for Waslala, Melisandra realizes that “ella representaba Waslala ante ellos. Quizás inconscientemente la habían ungido para encontrar el camino perdido, la salvación” (Belli 277).¹¹ Melisandra begins to feel the weight of the key role that she plays in the destiny and future of Faguas. She recognizes that she is not just a faceless citizen hoping to find her place in Faguas but is a key player in their destiny and salvation. This new knowledge, as Carol Christ puts it, is a “grounding of her quest in powers of being that are larger than her own personal will, this knowledge can support her when her own personal determination falters” (11). After the destruction of the Espada dictators, Faguas finds itself in a transitory state, and Faguas looks to her to succor, guide, and help them become the society that they have wanted to be for decades.

Nevertheless, Melisandra could not separate her own answer to those three spiritual questions from the Faguasenses’ answer until she was able to reunite with her mother. Away from tumult and rush, after leaving the Corredor de los Vientos¹² and upon entering Waslala, she

¹¹ After meeting the Espada brothers, Melisandra contemplates the deep connection between Faguas and Waslala. She comes to the conclusion that “cada quien pensaba que sólo el descubrimiento de Waslala redimiría a Faguas de su maldición bélica y les permitiría dedicar su heroísmo a una causa honorable. Waslala era considerada el último reducto del orden, lo único que podría devolverle a Faguas la perspectiva de una manera alternativa de vivir” (Belli 175). Waslala is more than just a legend for Faguas, it is a symbol of hope. Melisandra realizes that she herself represents hope to Faguas.

¹² The last step before entering Waslala. As with any mythic utopia, entrance requires a series of steps and conditions: “Era un secreto bien guardado, pero Waslala no era inaccesible. Era asunto de no desmemoriarse, de recordar las señales, esperar cierta cualidad del aire, cierta reverberación” (333). The last steps before meeting her mother showcase the importance of these rituals. It was necessary that she pass through all of the ceremonies in order to prepare herself to embrace the last and most important missing piece of her maternal history and culture.

notes that “[se siente] al fin curiosamente en paz, sin prisa” (313). Although content with the work that she has done and the work laid out for her, “La perspectiva cercana de encontrarla hacía que afloraran en ella emociones atávicas, vacíos, hambre de pecho y abrazo maternales” (305). Her grief once again manifest, Melisandra remembers the ancestral reason that she has been drawn to Waslala. Even with such aches, when she crosses the mythic threshold, she senses that the pain and frustration she had felt will begin to dissipate. After meandering through the streets and surveying a few houses, Melisandra is finally able to meet her mother.¹³ She waits in the only house that appears to be inhabited and while “sentada, inmóvil, esperando” she falls asleep (317). Despite all her growth through participation in reconstruction, Melisandra still feels stunted by the maternal void. She must then sit and wait for the next phase of her journey, reunion with Mother, so that she can complete her quest.

Reunion with Mother

After so many years without her mother, it is of no surprise that their long-awaited reunion is not punctuated with hugs and smiles. Rather, Melisandra awakens after waiting, sedentary, for her mother. Upon waking, Melisandra “vio frente a ella a una mujer que la observaba con unos ojos idénticos a los suyos” (317). Melisandra immediately recognizes herself

¹³ Melisandra was hoping to find both of her parents in Waslala. However, shortly after reuniting with her mother, she reports that he had died just months prior: “Murió hace casi cuatro meses. Estaba muy cansado, muy enfermo. Le hubiera gustado tanto verte; pero es mejor así. Él ya no era él” (319). Both the prior death of her father and the narrative focus on missing her mother draw focus on the indispensable role a mother plays in the daughter’s formation. As Dana Heller explains, “Furthermore, the removal of the father makes room for the exploration of issues surrounding maternal identification; it becomes not only possible but necessary to focus exclusively on the impact of the mother-daughter relationship in the quest of the female hero” (29).

in the features of her mother's face: "Melisandra se quedó quieta, contemplándola fascinada. Era ella misma. Ella frente al espejo varias décadas más tarde" (318). There is an undeniable connection that translates into their physicality.¹⁴ Looking into the mirror of the mother, she starts to recognize and identify herself. Melisandra needed to embark on this quest in order to find her own identity that she could not form due to maternal absence in her most formative years. Although her matriarchal network grew and her understanding of maternal history and culture did as well, her arrival at Waslala makes it clear that the mother-daughter relationship is indispensable. Thus, upon meeting her biological mother Melisandra is finally able to start to heal and develop her personal identity.

The beginning of Melisandra and the mother's reunion perfectly illustrates the mother-infant relationship Donald Winnicott describes: "What does the baby see when he or she looks at the mother's face? I am suggesting that, ordinarily, what the baby sees is himself or herself. In other words, the mother is looking at the baby and *what she looks like is related to what she sees there*" (19). It is through recognizing herself in her mother's visage that Melisandra is able to fully realize her path to autonomy. Madelon Sprengnether further expounds the significance of the mother-infant relationship: "In an optimal situation, the infant perceives itself as organized through its mother's attentive gaze, an essential step toward the condition of autonomy and the feeling of being in possession of one's own reality" (185). Reality and self-identity are formed through the Mother's gaze, through the care that she gives to her infant. Mother must take on an

¹⁴ The most important connection is seeing in her mother a mirror; this mirror, as Jacques Lacan theorized, comes to symbolize "the mirror stage as an identification, in the full sense that analysis gives to the term: namely, the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image—whose predestination to this phase-effect is sufficiently indicated by the use, in analytic theory, of the ancient term *imago*" (2). The mother is converted in an *imago* of Melisandra, Melisandra finally able to recognize herself and subsequently identify herself in the face of her mother. Donald W. Winnicott, influenced by Lacan, has also investigated the mirror stage, with focus on the mother-child relationship. As we see with Melisandra, "if no one person is there to be mother, the infant's developmental task is infinitely complicated" (Winnicott 18).

active role, she must be attentive in order for her child to develop. For Melisandra and her mother this did not happen immediately. After so many years, after only knowing each other by name, after passing time alone, missing and only imagining the other, Melisandra and the mother unsurprisingly took a long time to come to love at a warm, familial level: “Fue una lenta aproximación, no para abandonarse la una en brazos de la otra, sino para olerse, husmearse, reconocerse, en una ceremonia tensa, de felinas” (318). In an animal, primitive, atavistic ritual, they feel each other out, wanting, but always hesitating to accept the other. In that moment, wanting to call her mother, Melisandra finds herself unable and, “En vez de palabras, emitió el sonido de sus tristezas, el terror de las noches agotada de llamarla, su rechazo a brazos ajenos tratando de sustituirla, el llanto rabioso e impotente, el vacío innombrable de su absoluta incapacidad de comprender, y el dolor del desgarramiento primario que nunca hasta entonces reconoció en el trasfondo de cuanto la atormentara” (318–19). Again, in an animal, primitive, atavistic action, Melisandra expresses all the pain that she has felt because of maternal absence. She cries out, remembering how much more complicated her life has been without a mother. In response, “La madre, llorando quedamente, la consoló, la meció entre sus brazos, le susurró, canturreó canciones de cuna. Así por largo rato” (319). The mother finally grants Melisandra the attentive gaze she has hungered for all those years. Rocking her, singing to her as a parent does to an infant child, she acknowledges her pain and enacts all the maternal care she would have provided had she been present.

This attentive gaze carries on as Melisandra and her mother get to know each other. They spend Melisandra’s penultimate day in Waslala enjoying each other’s company:

Recorrieron Waslala de extremo a extremo, la madre y la hija gozándose en el mutuo descubrimiento, relatándose los grandes momentos de sus vidas, comparando sus

semejanzas, riéndose de manías compartidas, sus debilidades, sus fuerzas, los cuentos alegres y tristes del abuelo, la muerte de la abuela, trazos, pinceladas para rellenar los vacíos, las preguntas que ambas se hicieran en su soledad de mujeres (332).

This moment of idyllic solidarity is critical to Melisandra's Bildungsroman. Melisandra and her mother take the time to learn about their generational similarities, about the experiences and characteristics that bind them as mother and daughter. Their time spent laughing and sharing allows Melisandra to smooth out the harsh edges of maternal absence with memories, stories and knowledge. Both parties reconcile, developing a deeper connection to the point that "al fin [pudo] llamarla madre" (335). Audibly cementing their mother-daughter relationship, Melisandra demonstrates her growth and claims her personal identity. The meeting shows, as Laura Barbas Rhoden has suggested, that "the heroines of [Belli's] narratives actively seek their mothers and desire to base their identity, not on a separation from them, but on identification with them" (92). In this moment, she grows to comprehend what her own space is, not just in the Faguasense society but what her own space is beyond her immediate surroundings, the universe.

Thus, Melisandra's spiritual quest takes form. Christ suggests that the woman's spiritual quest "begins in an *experience of nothingness*" (13). Throughout the narrative, one can see the emptiness that Melisandra feels, from the cold, empty sheets to the bereft pain in her navel. The quest, then, ends with "an *awakening*, similar to a conversion experience, in which the powers of being are revealed. A woman's awakening to great powers grounds her in a new sense of self and a new orientation in the world" (Christ 13). Melisandra waking up to see her mother is the beginning of the end of the nothingness that she previously felt.¹⁵ That nothingness begins to

¹⁵ Susan J. Rosowski compares the novel of awakening (feminine) to the apprenticeship novel (masculine): "The direction of awakening follows what is becoming a pattern in literature by and about women: movement is inward, toward greater self-knowledge that leads in turn to a revelation of the disparity between that self-knowledge and the nature of the world" (49).

dissipate upon meeting her mother and finding her own identity, and, consequently, the power and authority that her mother possesses. As her mother explains the power that Waslala holds, Melisandra is emboldened to pose solutions to Faguas' problems. Remembering the space that she had found for herself in society, Melisandra reasons, "No podría quedarme aquí sabiendo lo que sucede allá" (335). Melisandra has truly awakened to her power and now, with a new concept of herself, she has reoriented herself so that she can help Faguas find its own identity and awaken to a new future.

Unlike the other members of Melisandra's matriarchal network, her mother never receives a name. As such, the mother becomes a universal figure. Melisandra's odyssey was more than just a journey to find her mother, and the mother she finds is more than just a psychoanalytic means to carry on with her life. Melisandra's journey downriver demonstrates that "Descent may lead a woman back in time, in search of lost traditions, lost female heroes. However, descent also leads back to her earliest recollections of the lost goddess in her own life, her mother" (Heller 18). Melisandra culminates her quest to learn maternal history and culture by finding the lost traditions of Waslala, finding a lost hero, and finding her own goddess.¹⁶ The mother becomes the apex of maternal history and culture. Moreover, her namelessness and position in legendary Waslala project her as a Mother archetype. Carl Jung posits that the fundamental qualities of the Mother archetype are "the magic authority of the female; the wisdom and spiritual exaltation that transcend reason; any helpful instinct or impulse; all that is benign, all that cherishes and sustains, that fosters growth and fertility. The place of magic

¹⁶ This is not to say that the two other maternal figures, María and Engracia, were not any of those things. Both women had instructed Melisandra on maternal history and culture. Both women were heroes in their own right to both Melisandra and Faguasenses. Both women were goddesses, evidenced by Engracia's Medusa-like qualities and Melisandra invoking her grandmother to protect the hacienda. Nevertheless, their influence and guidance are orienting steps to connecting Melisandra with her "own goddess, her mother."

transformation and rebirth...[is] presided over by the mother” (110). As Melisandra comes closer and closer to Waslala, she understands more of the magic, and more importantly, the perceived magic that it holds for Faguas. Waslala is a legendary land that aligns with the mythic maternal culture that has been woven into the narrative and inculcated by each of the mother figures along Melisandra’s quest. Indeed, the mother presides over this utopia of magic transformation. The sole habitant, she acts as “guardiana de la comunidad y de sus anales” (Lago Graña 78). As guardian, presider, goddess, and mother, she is at the head of Melisandra’s transformation. Knowing Melisandra’s place in the universe, however, she also serves as guardian, presider, goddess, and mother for Faguas itself. By providing the keys for Melisandra to understand her own authority, the mother provides keys for the transformation that Faguas yearns.

At the close of Melisandra’s stay in Waslala, the mother gives her daughter annals, records of Waslala. While containing the history of Waslala, they also contain a blueprint that Faguas can use in its reconstruction. She explains that the memorial she bequeaths contains “un recuento pormenorizado de qué hicimos, cómo lo hicimos. Nuestros errores, nuestros aciertos, lo que fue esta experiencia. Hay planos de lo que construimos; hay cuentos, poemas, novelas, ensayos escritos aquí, dibujos... Son tuyos, de Faguas” (335). The mother shifts her role as guardian of Waslala and its records to Melisandra. The records of all that it took to create the legend and utopia of Waslala shape the annals to become the titular memorial of the future. Melisandra’s mother teaches her this concept of a memory of the future: “Siempre pensamos que la memoria debe de referirse al pasado, pero es mi convicción que hay también una memoria, un memorial del futuro; que también albergamos el recuerdo de lo que puede llegar a ser” (329). The memorial will be fundamental for the next step as it does truly become a record of what Faguas can become. For so long Faguas dreamed of Waslala and now, with Melisandra’s return,

all that Waslala is will be at their fingertips. Everything that had contributed to the Faguasense myth, legend, and hope rests in Melisandra's hands and she has the blessing of Waslala's maternal guardian to use it.

The Heroine's Return

Now in possession of the memorial, Melisandra carries the weight and reality of Faguas' hopes. Knowing her authority and recognizing her duty, she leaves Waslala, leaves behind her mother, and, upon hearing the voice of her beloved Raphael, "[echa] a correr" (338).¹⁷ Running, Melisandra returns to society, ready and eager to motivate transformation. In his book *Spectral Nationality: Passages of Freedom from Kant to Postcolonial Literatures of Liberation*, Pheng Cheah describes an act of change in a postcolonial community as a transformation of "spaces [that] could not espouse a quietistic accommodation to existing society...but called for the radical transformation of society" (243). The later edition of *Waslala* evidences this radical transformation that Melisandra has galvanized. Melisandra's socialization¹⁸ is not an acquiescent return, but rather a return that absolutely changes her society and her world. She does not come back hoping to adapt to social reality, but comes back with plans, ready to revolutionize her social reality. The added epilogue from the 2006 edition, primary text of this study, brings a fantastic look at Melisandra, in her element, fully realizing her newfound position. Raphael describes the scene: "Ni él, ni quienes presenciaron el inusitado espectáculo, olvidarían la escena: la muchacha alumbrada por viejos faros de barco y de estadio, hablando apasionadamente de ese lugar ignoto y feliz" (339). Melisandra passionately shares what she has

¹⁷ The first edition of the book (1996) ended at this point, full of Melisandra's excitement and yearning to share this power with her beloved nation. The 2006 edition offers an epilogue that shows Melisandra's return to society.

¹⁸ Term often used in Bildungsroman narratives to describe the protagonist's return to society. Socialization, in its most ideal form, harmonizes society's norms and individual identity.

learned in a scene that no one could ever forget. That image becomes indelible and emblematic of transition and reconstruction. Her journey at a close, we see Melisandra glowing, content with her place at the center of change and transformation. Her growth is illuminated: she, a woman, who at the beginning of the novel, was irresolute about leaving home,¹⁹ now standing in front of everyone, passionately and unapologetically sharing her knowledge with Faguas and the world.

Her return to Faguas parallels the hero's return that Joseph Campbell has described as essential to the close of the hero's journey. The return requires that the hero, Melisandra, bring the trophy received through her quest back to her society: "The full round, the norm of the monomyth, requires that the hero shall now begin the labour of bringing the runes of wisdom, the Golden Fleece, or his sleeping princess, back into the kingdom of humanity, where the boon may redound to the renewing of the community, the nation, the planet, or the ten thousand worlds" (Campbell 170). The records of Waslala are the prized trophy that Melisandra has won from her adventures, and their sole purpose is to provide a path for Faguas to change and grow. Before parting, the mother solemnly instructs her: "Confío en vos, hija—le dijo al despedirse—. Confío Waslala a tu sabiduría, a tu imaginación" (337). She entrusts the knowledge contained in the annals to Melisandra, trusting that this heroine will bring change to her society. This charge is "enfática, solemne, como quien, al momento de morir, delega en el ser más amado, más cercano, la culminación de una sagrada y esencial empresa de redención" (337). Mother, acting as mother goddess, gives Melisandra a blessing to effect change in Faguas. As Campbell theorized: "If the hero in his triumph wins the blessing of the goddess or the god and is then explicitly commissioned to return to the world with some elixir for the restoration of society, the final stage of his adventure is supported by all the powers of his supernatural patron" (172). Backed by the

¹⁹ "Desde la muerte de su abuela lo estaba planeando. Cada año se lo proponía sólo para que a última hora le flaqueara la voluntad y el valor para enfrentar el rostro del abuelo" (Belli 16).

universal mother, Melisandra returns to Faguas and takes her place as head of change and reconstruction.

Melisandra's return to society and the radical transformation her prize offers are the fulfillment of her spiritual quest: "Recently women have begun to write about the connections between spirituality and personal and social change. They have pointed out that women's spiritual quest provides new visions of individual and shared power that can inspire a transformation of culture and society" (Christ 131). Through her journey of learning maternal history and culture, Melisandra comes to find her own identity. She comprehends the authority she possesses, and how she can uniquely use it to aid those in her society. By sharing the Waslala vision of what Faguas can now become, she inspires her fellow community members. Due to the quest for wholeness that Melisandra seeks in herself and in her society, it becomes difficult to separate the spiritual quest from the social quest, especially in Melisandra's journey: "The drive to integrate the spiritual and the social quests also arises out of the impulse toward wholeness in women's quest. Dualistic thinking encourages a separation of the spiritual from the social, but whole thinking looks forward to the realization of spiritual insight in social reality" (Christ 130). Part of Melisandra's journey is bringing the spiritual elements²⁰ of maternal history and culture that she had learned from her matriarchal network into her own social reality. Through all that she has learned, Faguas can better strive for wholeness in reconstructing their broken civilization. Christ further emphasizes the connection between spiritual quest and social change:

²⁰ Carol Christ maintains that spiritual quest is based on mystical experiences. Melisandra meeting her mother, a veritable goddess figure, in the mythic Waslala can very well be considered a mystical experience. Besides this climactic mystical experience, various episodes along her journey tender a mystic quality to her odyssey in general. Christ further explains, "By mysticism in women's experience I refer to a woman's direct experience of her grounding in the powers of being that sometimes, but not always, takes the form of identification between the self and the powers of being. Besides opening them to the experience of nothingness, traditional roles may encourage in women a habitual attitude of receptivity, thus opening them to the mystical experience of union or integration with powers" (19).

“Moreover, women’s spiritual quest involves a probing to the bedrock of a woman’s experience of self and world that can support her quest to change the values of her society” (11). Her knowledge of Waslala gained throughout the course of her journey and the memorial of the future offer a foundation upon which Faguas can base its transformation. In sum, her individual growth facilitates Faguas’ change.

Melisandra’s development serves to help Faguas seek its global belonging and answer its own profound questions of identity. When she and Raphael leave Cineria to continue on with the quest to find Waslala, they leave a Faguas hoping to reconstruct itself. Raphael, a journalist who had hoped to write about the illicit drug trade, observes that the focus of the story had changed: “Se trataba de rehacer un país. Ésa era verdaderamente la historia” (277). Melisandra, with the memorial of Waslala, is the medium through which the country can reinvent itself. Succinctly, “The hero is the champion of things becoming, not of things become, because [she] *is*” (Campbell 207). What Melisandra brings to Faguas is not an exact model but a blueprint that they can use to become, to grow, to develop their own identity.²¹ Melisandra is not a hero of Waslala, she is the hero of Faguas; the hero championing and bringing forth change, the hero allowing Faguas to finally become. Melisandra was able to “become” through regaining her maternal history and culture. Through her journey it becomes apparent that “it is in relation to the powerful figure of the mother, rather than the father/Father, that this refashioning [of identity] takes place” (Bolaki 20). Melisandra’s mother plays a crucial role not only in fostering wholeness in Melisandra’s identity, but also in developing the nation of Faguas. She was vital for Melisandra to construct her own identity. Correspondingly, the mother, hand in hand with the records of Waslala, is vital for Faguas to reconstruct its identity.

²¹ “Pero Faguas tendrá que ser Faguas; encontrar su propio camino. Lo real y lo ideal tendrán que iluminarse mutuamente; uno ir en pos del otro hasta que un día se alcancen” (Belli 329–30).

Conclusion

The atavistic mother-daughter relationship formed between quester and Mother allows for the growth and development of both an individual and a society. As part of her journey, a woman must build her own matriarchal network, but eventually recognizes that it is incomplete without her own goddess. Consequently, the search to build understanding of maternal history and culture culminates in reconciliation with the mother goddess, however she might present herself. As Barbas Rhoden claims, “[Belli’s] novels refigure notions of motherhood and link these conceptions to definitions of history and identity, thus acknowledging the interaction between private and public realms often ignored in male-centered texts” (94). Through all her works, *Waslala* stands out in its configuration of the Mother. In this story, we see the direct influence of the Mother, her words and her actions, stimulating change in a broken community. While there are many critical themes and lessons to take from *Waslala*, this new understanding of the archetype of Mother is noteworthy and striking. There are numerous studies on the Mother in relation to the individual, but, as Belli shows us, her embrace can extend much further. Through the Mother’s gaze and knowledge, a child can understand their identity and a woman can understand her authority. Through her we rediscover the creative power of a woman and the potent figure of Mother for a society dreaming and longing for reconstruction.

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