

EXPLORING PSYCHOLOGICAL TRAUMA AND IDENTITY IN ALICE WALKER'S *POSSESSING THE SECRET OF JOY*

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ABSTRACT

Alice Walker's "Possessing the Secret of Joy" explores psychological trauma and identity post-FGM, delving into memory, body disassociation, and self-integration. This study analyzes Tashi's quest for wholeness amid cultural oppression, using trauma theories and identity frameworks. It examines the broader socio-cultural impact of FGM on individual and collective identities. Walker, a Pulitzer Prize-winning author, intertwines themes of trauma, identity, and resilience. Through this exploration, the study enhances understanding of enduring trauma repercussions and the pursuit of self-discovery in adversity.

Keywords: Psychological trauma, identity, FGM, disassociation, cultural oppression, resilience.

Alice Walker is the first woman writer who took initiative to talk about female genital mutilation. She came to know about this practice of female genital circumcision when she went to Africa in 1965 during the filming of *The Color Purple*. There she came to know about the existence of such practices in society. When a photograph of a young black girl with a blank look in her eyes who had undergone this procedure was shown to her, she astonished. From that point she decided to publicize this issue worldwide and bring the real face of society. Her fifth novel *Possessing the Secret of Joy* turned out to be a masterpiece which tells us all about circumcision, all its negative consequences that woman faces throughout her life. Her main focus was upon the psychological trauma that women face after circumcision.

Female genital mutilation (FGM) is defined by many theorists as a harmful cultural practice involving the partial or total removal of the external female genitalia for non-medical reasons. This procedure is often performed on girls and women, impacting their physical, emotional, and psychological well-being. The World Health Organization categorizes FGM into four types, ranging from clitoridectomy to

infibulation, each representing different degrees of genital cutting. Writers and social activists contribute to the discourse on female genital mutilation (FGM). Notable figures include Nawal El Saadawi, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, and Efua Dorkenoo, who have discussed FGM in the context of gender oppression, cultural norms, and human rights.

Alice Walker relies upon sexual violence and verbal abuse on black people. She exhibits the utmost turmoil and disturbances created in America due to the Civil Rights Movement for the blacks, as they fought for their rights against white supremacy. It is very clear in the novels of African-American writers that black men have had to fight with racism and classicism, while black women have had to struggle with racism, classicism, sexism, language barrier within and outside the community, women are obliged to accept all the social conventions and cultural duties which are man-made and carried out since time immemorial.

In *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, culture plays a central role as Alice Walker explores the intricate dynamics of cultural traditions, particularly those related to female genital mutilation. The novel delves into the clash between Tashi's African heritage and the detrimental aspects of certain cultural practices. Walker navigates the complexities of cultural identity, shedding light on how traditions can both enrich and oppress individuals. The exploration of cultural nuances becomes a lens through which the character grapple with the consequences of deeply ingrained beliefs, raising questions about the preservation and transformation of cultural practices in the face of evolving perspectives.

The novel focuses about the suffering and the breaking of taboos. First, the novel's actions focus on the cultural rite of female circumcision. Second, the fictional world within which the African protagonist lives as an African American woman. In the name of tradition female circumcision is performed, a custom in which women's vagina is operated and tightened to make more enjoyable for men. The novel depicts the age-old practice of female genital mutilation. The protagonist as well as other women characters of the text face the problem of existence, self-dignity, and trauma where they are circumcised under the pressure of patriarchy.

Tashi the protagonist of the novel, undergoes psychological trauma. The whole story of the novel revolves around the black, tribal African girl who was first seen in the previous novel of the writer *The Color Purple*. Tashi in her childhood luckily escaped from circumcision and was married to an American man Adam and fled to the west, but her loyalty to the customs of her people led her to surrender

herself to this traditional practice. Her American self is Evelyn but her old identity as Tashi (Olinkian tribe girl) forces her to go back to get the stamp of her real identity, real Tashi. But she does not know about the consequences that she might have to face after this decision of her. She is so deep rooted in her tradition that she failed to realize what she wanted and what not. She not even thinks about her husband Adam who loved her madly. She somewhere feels that she is not a complete woman because she is not circumcised like other women in her tribe.

In Olinka tribe, circumcision is compulsory to become a part of that tribe. “Everyone knew that if a woman was not circumcised her unclean parts would grow so long they’d soon touch her thighs; she’d become masculine and arouse herself” (112-113). The Olinka women who are not circumcised are treated as unclean. There is also a myth that if a woman is not circumcised, her vaginal lips grows so long and would reach her thighs. In Olinka tribe even mothers force their daughters to get circumcision because circumcision is compulsory for marriage, no man in village is allowed to get married to a girl who is not circumcised. Some of them voluntarily surrender themselves because it is something that differentiated them from others. As Tashi says, “These marks gave me courage. I wanted such mark for myself” (23). Her faith in her culture and to carry that with her to America leads to her decision to submit to the tsunga’s knife and be genitally mutilated. This decision leads her life into darkness and goes mad with time.

This novel concentrates on the three women characters. Tashi, Ayesha and Amy Maxwell of three different races and ethnicities, who faced the ruckus of FGM. Tashi an African and later an African American and Ayesha of middle East decent and Amy Maxwell is European woman, who is forcefully subjugated to ritualistic female genital mutilation although that practice is not a part of her culture. Male from all the races and classes show off their masculinity by giving physical pain and aggression to women and children. Tashi belongs to Olinka tribe in a small village in Africa. It is the same village where Adam and Olivia, Celie’s children from the novel *The Color Purple* lives.

Though *Possessing the Secret of Joy* is not exactly the continuation of *The Color Purple*, still the prominent characters are taken from there. Adam and Olivia grow up with Tashi there having a sweet relation with her. In the beginning of the novel Tashi says, “I did not realize for a long time that was dead” (03). By telling the story of a Panda who has a co-wife, she initiated her story. Many a time Tashi tassels

between her country and her culture, as a woman and Tashi (herself). She always sees herself in terms of her country. Many times, she is neglected because of her skin colour and belongings. She belongs to that race, where for the women marriage is more important than life, education, career or anything else of the world. She feels a closer relation with her people, her tribe, her tradition and country. For this reason, she goes against her childhood friend Olivia and says “all I care about now is my people, you are a foreigner”. Further Tashi adds, “who are you and your people never to accept us as we are? Never to intimate any of our ways?” (21).

Tashi is in contact with Adam who is an educated man and who does not believe in cruel traditions like FGM. Initially Tashi does not believe in the action but when she deeply observes the pain and suffering of her people, how they were thrown away from their homes. So, Tashi decides to submit herself to the act voluntarily in spite of Olivia and Adam’s warning not to submit. When Tashi undergoes circumcision, not a single family member is available near her. But immediately after knowing the incident Adam comes back, marries and takes her to America in the hope of a new happy married life. But the trauma does not allow her to lead a happy life.

FGM causes many mental and physical problems inside her. Tashi faces the worst result of FGM. When she delivers a baby boy Benny who is mentally challenged the causes are only due to FGM. Gradually Tashi’s marital life is overshadowed by her ill mental and physical health caused due to circumcision she has undergone. Then Tashi wonders why women are forced to perform female genital mutilation and why it is a taboo in some societies to talk about to practice. All this incident never allows Tashi to forget her circumciser, M’Lissa who is known as Tsunga and then Tashi strongly blames her as the source of her difficulties. She decides to end her sufferings and pain of all the girls, women of the tribe by murdering M’Lissa. She also does what she decides and kills her when she gets an opportunity. Obviously after killing the most important person of the community she is trailed in the court. Despite all the struggles of her husband and sons to save her, she is finally executed.

“Tashi is convinced that the little girls who are dying, and the women too, are infected by the unwashed, unsterilized sharp stones, tin tops, bits of glass, rusty razors and grungy knives used by the *tsunga*” (235). She senses the need to be a savior of young women who undergo such pain. The violence in her raises to the

level where she wants to avenge the psychological manipulation thrust on her. Tashi decides to go to Olinka to kill the mother of circumcision called M'Lissa who propagates and advocates infibulation. Tashi slyly kills her with those same razors and blades which she had used to mutilate her and other women. M'Lissa presents her reasons that this act gives her livelihood and she further adds that she too has undergone the same pain and there was no one to save her. So, she feels happy for having been killed by Tashi as she believes the patriarchal dictum that it is a boon to be killed by the one she has infibulated. Tashi faces trial in Olinka for killing a national icon, who propagates patriarchy. By killing the tsunga, Tashi symbolically breaks the tradition that stood between her and wholeness. Tashi gets caught and faces trial and is sentenced to death but still she feels relaxed after killing M'Lissa, the symbol of patriarchy, sexism, Tashi gets relaxation from her hysteria and masochism to a great extent.

The severe clitoridectomy and infibulation are kept as tabooed secrets to help accentuate male rule and desire for the survival of patriarchy as an institution controlling many women like Tashi, Ayesha, Amy Maxwell on the physical, emotional and psychological fronts. Women are pitted and used like tools against women for spoiling the wellbeing and wholeness of one another. So M'Lissa tells Tashi, "I thought you were a fool . . . The very biggest" (227). Circumcision hurts not only the woman but also the child she may carry. Tashi's son, Benny Johnson is presented here as a mentally retarded boy which is the result of his brain being damaged during his birth. His birth procedure was complicated because of Tashi's infibulation. For American doctors and nurses, circumcision is strange and meaningless, so they are shocked to see a hole in Tashi's sexual organ. Both mother and the baby suffer from the side effects of circumcision until the end of their lives.

The deadly process of circumcision happens with Tashi which is the result of her insanity although everyone tried to make her stop from that procedure. The incident happened in her life when she was mature enough to understand the world and people but unfortunately without thinking anything just made herself ready for the operation. Without a second thought or any research she just thinks it is her own culture and goes for it, which is proven as insane. Olivia says, ". . . and anyway. She should have had it when she was eleven, if she was going to have it. She's too old for it now" (preface).

Tashi attempts to help other women and raise awareness among themselves. In that Olinka tribe women have no rights over their own body. From the conversion of Tashi and M'lissa it is clear that:

A proper woman must be cut and sewn to fit only her husband, whose pleasure depends on an opening, it might take months, even years, to enlarge men's love and enjoy the struggle, you said for the women . . . but you never said anything about the women, did you, M'Lissa? about the pleasure she might have, or the suffering. (208)

Tashi was taken to the psychiatrist by Adam for treatment. He shows her a video cassette which was taken in one of the African town some twenty-five years back. In that video, a girl lying on the ground is about to perform the ritual of Circumcision. In the video there is also a scene of cock fighting: "It walked about quite freely, crowing mighty and that was the only sound or movement" (69). Tashi experiences overwhelming fear and becomes senseless after watching the clips. She visualizes a hen not cock that is waiting near the hut to gulp the piece of meat thrown out after surgery. It is described as:

A chicken – a hen, not a cock – was scratching futilely in the dirt between the hut and the tree where the other girls, their own ordeal over, lay. M'Lissa lifted her foot and flung this small object in the direction of the hen, and she, as if waiting for this moment, rushed toward M'Lissa's upturned foot, located the flung object in the air and then on the ground, and in one quick movement of beak and neck, gobbled it down. (71)

When Tashi returns to her consciousness she starts drawing the picture of the frightening cock on the walls. She draws pictures of cock. The foot of the cock grows larger and larger it cannot be drawn on paper. When psychiatrist asks, is this a man's foot or of a woman's foot? She becomes confused. When she returns home, in the following night she paints pattern crazy road. Crisscross pattern of dots made by her village girl when she was a child. when she completed her painting she slept well. When in the next evening Mzee puts a question to her. "Are you better for having done it" (78). She replied positively without any hesitation. She starts crying and missing her sister Dura. Dura, her elder sister died as a result of excessive blood loss during circumcision. She painted last night, and it reminded her of all her past memories of her childhood. She started remembering when she and her sister Dura

played and hide in the Elephant fields, video clips helped her to realize her problem clearly.

“Psychic trauma involves intense personal suffering, but it also involves the recognition of realities that most of us have not begun to face” (Preface VII). When Dura died in her childhood, she did not cry that time because African custom declare women must not cry but now she mourns over her death. She wonders how M’Lissa women herself did so much cruelty to all the young girls of the village. She decided to murder M’Lissa who kills Dura in order to take her revenge she came back to Africa. She is ready to take risk of her life because she knew the fact that once she murdered her, all Olinkian tribe turned against her. In Olinkian tribe M’Lissa is worshipped as God. In the end of the Novel she finally killed M’Lissa the traditional Circumciser of the Olinkian village. She is ‘no more and satisfied’. By killing her she had completed the role of liberator, that actually means to her.

In this novel Tashi is both a martyr and winner. She is martyr because of circumcision on the other hand, she is winner because she saved many women’s life in Olinkian tribe by killing M’lissa. She was executed to breaking the silence of women’s lives in general and their circumcision in particular. At the end of the novel, women gather together to sing the song of union with Tashi. Tashi seems to be emerging as a martyr in her novel. She is executed for an essential cause, that might save millions in future. She is depicted as black heroes who had given their life in freedom struggle. Tashi states:

Dying now does not frighten me. The execution is to take place where this government has executed so many others, the soccer field. I will refuse the blindfold so that I can see all directions. I will concentrate on the beauty of one blue hill in the distance, and for me that tomorrow will be eternity. (262)

For an essential cause she had given her life so that million may save their future. When she was executed all her family members, close friends furlled a huge banner with a slogan, “RESISTANCE IS THE SECRET OF JOY!” (264).

Alice Walker, also a black woman herself, faces many hardships and endless struggle throughout her life. For this reason, she always shows sisterly concern for all the women who face many hardships and problems. When she became familiar with Female genital mutilation, from that point she decided to help those sisters who are in danger of this cruel practice. Through the characterization of Tashi

in the novel *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, she forefronts this practice. Through the depiction of Tashi, she made a global fight against Female Genital circumcision. Her main focus in this novel is to show the trauma, pain and suffering Tashi faces in her whole life and that is also the story of millions of women who never got the chance to raise their voices. She came out as a mouth piece for all those women of the world and awaken them to fight for their rights because she believes that only through awareness and sisterly concern for each other, we can fight against all those evils in the society that hindered her progress. She ends her novel with a message that “RESISTANCE IS THE SECRET OF JOY!” (264).

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