

The Secret Murder of Joy: An Ecofeministic Study on Alice Walker's

possessing the Secret of Joy

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Abstract

Throughout the history of evolution of humankind, there has been disparity and discrimination. Diversity in nature and its creation has always been upheld through this discrepancy that exists in the society. Ecofeminism essentially is an amalgam of the feminist and ecology movements, the former centering on the concern for women and the latter on nature. It emphasizes the relationship between human beings and nature, since it stresses that the human being “has an organic connection with nature”.

The focus of this research paper is to explore the status of Black Women through an ecofeministic lens as portrayed in Alice Walker's possessing the Secret of Joy. Walker launches an uncompromising attack on the plain sexist culturalism of female genital mutilation where the female body is subjected to disfigurement on account of patriarchal ideologies. As a way of opposing colonial Imperialism, Tashi, the protagonist of the fiction goes under the knife and Walker explicitly parallels the subjugation of native black women and nature through the label called 'culture' by the androcentric society.

Key Words: Ecofeminism, Black women, sexist culturalism, FGM, subjugation

Possessing the Secret of Joy is a clear conceptualization of Walker's ecofeminist stance with the homologous relationship she maintains between the oppression of women and the exploitation of nature. The central theme of the novel, the monstrous ritual of female genital mutilation, can be read as a symbolic expression of man's control over the female body and sexuality. The novel is a contemporary and radical feminist rebuke of a tribal god who insisted on female circumcision and hence the African females lost their vulva. Tashi, the wounded African heroine, learns by degrees that "White is not the culprit this time" (106), eventually discovering that African tribalism and sexism are responsible for her psychological maiming and subsequent crises.

Tashi's wounding begins with the death of her older sister Dura, who bleeds to death from female genital circumcision. Out of the three types of female circumcision, the Olinka girls undergo infibulation often in less-than-sanitary conditions. Infibulation leaves only a small opening for the vagina, which can give heightened sexual pleasure to a man during intercourse, but makes urination, menstruation, intercourse, and especially the birth process not only painful but also life-threatening. True to her intractable sexual revolt and revolutionary politics, Walker dedicates *Possessing the Secret of Joy* with "Tenderness and Respect to the Blameless Vulva," choosing for her female characters the most radical form of female circumcision, infibulation.

Surreptitiously, Tashi has gone to the place of the baths in her village, has heard her sister Dura's screams, and has seen the bloody aftermath of the "operation," but she represses the memory of the experience and retains only a phobia of blood. As a result of this repression and her silence, she later submits herself to the African traditions of scarification (a different kind of maiming) and, even later, as a young woman, of infibulation. White missionaries have always tried to change the traditional practices of the Olinkans. The new missionaries, even though they are Blacks, are viewed with suspicion and hostility by the villagers. As a result, the attempts made by the missionaries to make the villagers aware of the harmful effect of the rite of genital mutilation which has been practised in the village of Olinka is looked upon as yet another attempt of changing the ways of the natives. In their eagerness to resist cultural imperialism, the villagers reinforce the traditional practices.

With an inflated ego, Tashi informs an objecting Olivia (Celie's daughter from *The Color Purple* [1982] who is a missionary in Africa and sister to Adam whom Tashi marries), "All I care about now is the struggle for our people. . . . You are black, but you are not like us. We look at you and your people with pity [for] you barely [possess] your own black skin" (22-23).

Tashi's reluctance to obey the missionaries, who force the natives to change their ways, goes to the extent of bearing the wounds of the tradition. Her protest against the colonization of land by the Whites is expressed by scarring her body in accordance with the Olinkan tribal practice. Examining the link between various oppressions, the famous Ecological Feminist Chris J Cuomo observes: "There is no pure gender, or instance of sexism, not coexistent with race, class, and sexuality, and accompanying oppressions and privileges" (Ecological Communities).

Tashi eventually underwent the procedure as a symbol of unity and loyalty to her village and its imprisoned leader. She tells her psychiatrist that she was more than willing to give up sexual pleasure in order "to be accepted as a real woman...to stop the jeering" (Walker 120). She was already considered a possible liability due to her relationship with the village missionaries, and so when the national leader, "Our Leader" as she calls him, said from prison that they "must keep all...[the]...old ways," she went under the *tsunga's* knife (120). As a visible expression of their protest against the environmental mutilation, the men decide to bear the marks of wounds on their faces. The women who feel stronger affinity to nature, go a step further and mutilate their genitals. Thus Walker treats the theme of female initiation as an act of empathy, "the ageless magic" of healing, towards the colonized and exploited land. But these innocent victims of the monstrous ritual fail to understand that the leaders who insist on keeping the traditional practices, are actually using tradition as a political tool to mobilize the people against the colonizers (Warrior Marks 248). This makes clear how women are oppressed within their own culture.

Mzee's showing of a film of his visit to an African village with its ritual ceremony of initiation jars Tashi's repressed memory of Dura's death and eventually causes her to reveal her dream. After viewing the film, Tashi draws and paints a foot and fighting cocks, but there is a giant "strutting" cock that waits for the "insignificant and unclean" vulva that the "foot" tosses to it (75). Realizing that the giant cock is really a hen and that the foot belongs to M'Lissa, the *tsunga* who has operated on Dura and killed her, Tashi recalls her visit to the village bath and acknowledges Dura's "murder" (83, 116) and the women's participation in the murder. All is part of Walker's authorial pronouncement on the hierarchy of oppression with women colluding with men against other women and therefore participating in their own oppression in a patriarchal society. Indeed, later M'Lissa confesses to Tashi that Catherine (their mother) had helped to hold Dura down for the operation that killed her.

With her revelations, Tashi is forced to see the falseness of her masked self as “Completely woman. Completely African. Completely Olinka”—the self-centered and limited, petty world of the ego. When she begins to awaken to the truth about her society, her culture, and the pain inflicted on women, Tashi confesses, “I was crazy,” for as she goes to have her face scarred with identifying tribal marks, she sees “potbellied” children “with dying eyes” and “old people” lying on “piles of rags” while the village women make “stew out of bones” (24). Unable to reconcile the impoverishment of her culture with the cultural arrogance she exudes, Tashi develops a “passion for storytelling” and slips into madness. To chronicle Tashi’s descent into madness and her resulting fragmentation, Walker creates six personas: **Tashi**, the troubled African child; **Evelyn**, the scarred adult Tashi who becomes an American citizen; **Tashi-Evelyn**, the African American who is haunted by her nightmarish African past; **Evelyn-Tashi**, the Americanized African; and **Tashi-Evelyn-Mrs. Johnson**, the aging Black woman who confesses to killing M’Lissa, the mutilator or *tsunga*. And, finally, there is **Tashi Evelyn Johnson Soul**, who achieves the Self upon her reconciliation of opposites, resistance to lies, and acceptance of death for her “crime” of alerting other women to her conviction that resistance to lies (imposed through silence upon suffering women in a patriarchal social order) is the real secret of joy. This pronouncement is Walker’s attempt to dispel the myth of racist anthropology, propagated by Mirella Ricciardi in her book *African Saga* (1982), which holds that black people can survive anything, including all their sufferings, because they possess “the secret of joy.”

As in many cultures, the circumciser in *Possessing the Secret of Joy* holds an honored place in the Olinka village. M’Lissa, the village *tsunga*, explains to Tashi that “since the people of Olinka became a people there has always been a *tsunga*” (Walker 212). She tells Tashi of her own initiation ceremony, “what my mother started, the witchdoctor finished...I could never again see myself, for the child that finally rose from the mat three months later...was not the child who had been taken there. I was never to see that child again” (214-5). As a *tsunga*, she had to learn “not to feel” in order to perform her tasks (214). M’Lissa was always admired for her role in the village, but especially so after the liberation wars. She was “honored” by the Olinkan government for “her unfailing adherence to the ancient customs and traditions of the Olinka state”; her attendant tells Tashi that M’Lissa is a “national monument” (147, 150).

While discussing “Our Leader,” Tashi mentions how he said, “no Olinka man...would even think of marrying a woman who was not circumcised” (Walker 120). In a culture where a woman's sole purpose is to be a wife and mother, this is a very convincing reason to be

circumcised and to make sure that one's daughters also are. The procedure is so ingrained in the society, that myths concerning uncircumcised women have been accepted as truth. Tashi says that “everyone believed it, even though no one had ever seen it...no one living in our village anyway...and yet the elders, particularly, acted as if everyone had witnessed this evil, and not nearly a long enough time ago.” While speaking about woman's sexual autonomy, Walker, through Tashi points out that woman is not allowed to touch her body. Her own body and the functioning of the sexual organs remain a mystery to her. Chris J. Cuomo speaks about this kind of exploitation: ... females are often alienated from their own bodily functions and processes. Woman's health and sexuality has also become a primary site for man's exercise of patriarchal and racist political power. (Ecological Feminism 98)

The question of how to deal with circumcised women is a topic under much debate in the medical and counseling professions. Until a few years ago, very little was officially done to cater to the special needs of these women. Alice Walker says in *Warrior Marks* that she wrote *Possessing the Secret of Joy* as a method of seeing the “ways in which the women are rather routinely mutilated in most parts of the world and how people tend to think of the pain done to women as somehow less than pain done to men” (Parmar 267). She claims to have made a very strong connection to the idea of these girls being hurt while everyone else was “making merry” (268).

It is also believed that the AIDS epidemic in Africa can be partially linked to circumcision. Olivia, Adam's sister, talks of how “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*, who might mutilate twenty children without cleaning her instrument” (247). Walker interviewed a circumciser in her documentary, *Warrior Marks*, and asked her about the precautions she used to avoid “infection.” The circumciser, whom Walker picked explained that she boiled the instruments in water, dried them, and put them back in the package. She buys a new package of blades for each ceremony and uses one blade for two children (Parmar 314-6). The documentary also contained an interview with Dr. Henriette Kouyate, a gynecologist based in Senegal, who speaks of her conviction that there is a link between AIDS and circumcision, namely communal circumcision: the circumciser has her own blade, she cuts and passes from one child to the next with the same blade, soiled with blood, the hands soiled with blood. So it's evident that if she is a carrier of AIDS, if she cuts herself she

can transmit the disease. Or if one of the children being circumcised is a carrier she can transmit it. (297-8)

Years after she marries Adam and relocates to America as a “wounded American,” an adult Tashi returns to Africa to seek vengeance on M’Lissa, whom she confronts:

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 love and enjoy the struggle, you said. For the woman.... But you never said anything about the woman, did you M’Lissa? . . . I am weeping now, myself. For myself. For Adam. For our son Benny (the radiant brown baby who was born retarded as the vital part of the brain was crushed during birth), the daughter, I was forced to abort. There is caesarean section, you know, the aborting doctor had said. But I knew I could not bear being held down and cut open. The thought of it had sent me reeling off into the shadows of my mind; where I’d hidden out for months. (224)

In *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, African women are sacrificial breeders in a patriarchal and polygamous tribal society which has made female circumcision a “sacred” or religious rite of passage intended to make a woman fit for marriage. The village elders believe that God “created the tsunga” and thus it is a religious taboo to break the silence surrounding what Walker presents as a psychic trauma that women have endured for centuries in Africa and the Middle East. In the afterword, Walker cites statistics that indicate that ninety to one hundred million women living today have experienced this torturous rite of passage (283).

Presenting what she appears to believe is a natural male/female duality, Walker subverts and exposes traditional Africa’s rejection of this duality and the autonomous rights of pleasure and gratification for women as well as for men. Rhetorically, Walker attacks “primitive” African society and its cultural female rites.

Walker’s gender-specific language is intended to attack and mock the patriarchal ethos of Tashi’s Olinka society and its political-moral biases which “justify” the suppression of females. Dressed like an American, but speaking like an Olinka, Evelyn leaves America to return to Africa to kill M’Lissa and is accused of murdering a “monument” (163). Tashi-Evelyn visits M’Lissa and “fingers” the razors that she has purchased to kill her, “fantasizing” M’Lissa’s “bloody demise” (208). But it is Tashi who thinks of leaping up and strangling M’Lissa after listening to the stories of her painful life as a “tsunga” (224). Tashi confesses to Olivia her innocence of M’Lissa’s murder; but Tashi-Evelyn-Mrs. Johnson states, “I did it” while on trial,

and writes to the deceased Lisette, “Tomorrow morning I will face the firing squad for killing someone who many years ago, killed me” (267, 274).

Walker’s idea of poetic justice is presented in Tashi’s premeditated killing of M’Lissa, who anticipates and even foresees “the murder of the tsunga, the circumciser, by one of those whom she has circumcised” (208). It is not for M’Lissa’s murder, however, that Tashi Evelyn Johnson Soul is executed. Although a tsunga and a “national monument,” as a woman M’Lissa is expendable. Tashi dies for breaking the silence surrounding the misery of women’s lives in general and their circumcision in particular. Exposing the cruelty of tribal society, Tashi makes signs of protest (an American custom), using the colors of the African flag as Walker merges global traditions and creates a nexus of African American unity. Resistance to the lies of female suffering brings her the secret of joy, and she, in turn, shares this joy of resistance and truth with other women who attend her execution, bringing ancient fertility dolls, “wild flowers, herbs, seeds, beads,” and “ears of corn” in a feminist celebration of women’s harvest (193)—the coming of age, the coming of consciousness.

Walker outrageously proclaims that if something is proved to be harmful, it has to be rooted out. She points out the need to differentiate between culture and torture. She says: “I maintain that culture is not child abuse, it is not battering. People customarily do these things just as they customarily enslaved people, but slavery is not culture, nor is mutilation” (Warrior Marks 270). Walker prefers to consider the word ‘culture’ in its literal sense, in terms of health and growth especially because her father was a farmer and her mother a gardener. She too likes gardening. Thus in her opinion ‘culture’ is something in which one should thrive, the body and spirit simultaneously.

Moreover, the ecocentric dimensions she attributes to this evil practice is quite explicit in her emphatic statement that “mutilated women, in Africa and elsewhere, are increasingly mirroring a mutilated world”. She continues: “For the earth to know health and happiness, this violence against women must stop. We cannot care for the environment around us, our self designated role from the beginning, if we are in excruciating pain” (Anything We Love 42).

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