

## Feminism in Alice Walker's *Possessing the Secret of Joy*

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### Abstract

This paper focuses on Alice Walker's novel, *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. Walker remains a representative figure of African-American women. Her writings are considered as the representative voice of the people in America, and everywhere, where they are discriminated for being born women, Black, poor, or African. Walker's writings focus on the struggle of African Americans, particularly women, and this exposes the views hidden in the societies that are racist, sexist and violent. These writings deal with the human experiences in general but especially from the perspective of the suffering and the downtrodden, the hurt and the oppressed. Many of her characters are victims of racial, sexual and economic oppression and exist under degrading circumstances. These characters, nevertheless, particularly the women, do not lie down and suffer passively in the face of such traumas, rather they manage to transcend their desperate and painful circumstances in order to affirm life. Walker's most remarkable novel, *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, is about female mutilation. The main character Tashi's voice alternates with that of her best friend and her husband to provide a constant flow of insights into the brutal misogyny suffered by many black women. The novel

is a poetic and powerful condemnation of the practice of female circumcision and advises females to stand up for their rights and reject the circumcision which hurts women physically and psychologically.

Keywords: Black Consciousness, Feminism, Discrimination, Mutilation.

Feminism is a range of political movements, ideologies and social movements that share a common goal to establish and achieve political, economic, personal and social equality of sexes. Feminist movement has campaigned and continued to fight for women's right, including the right to vote, to hold public office, to work, to own property, to have maternity leave etc. Feminist consists of ideas and beliefs about what are these beliefs and culture like for women, compared to what the world is like for men just because they are men. This form or aspect of feminism, in ethical terms, is descriptive. Feminism, in other words, describes a culture in which women are treated differently than men, and in that difference of treatment, women are at a disadvantage, and feminism assumes that such treatment is cultural and thus possible to change.

Feminists down the centuries have thoroughly verified the category called the feminine. Gender equations become a major area of feminist concern since they regard gender as a cultural construct. Being a woman may be a biological categorization but being feminine is a cultural construct. The category called the feminine is constructed with reference to the male, the masculine, the norm, the centre: "Just as for the ancients, there was an absolute vertical with reference to which the oblique is defined, so there is an absolute human type, the masculine." (Beauvoir 15) Simone de Beauvoir further elaborates the process of cultural othering:

She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with

reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other. (16)

This process of taking the masculine as the benchmark against, which the deviant called feminine is measured and analysed creates a negating effect on feminine identity. This process is accentuated by the hegemonic pursuits of the different societal institutions.

The resurgence of feminism in the 1960's and 1970's is based on the shared recognition that women are oppressed, and that there is a need to develop a theory and politics that would further the process of women's liberation from male suppression. The ideologically conditioned cultural parameters value the activities of men and degrade women, and literature both shapes and responds to this culture. It perpetuates patriarchal ideals through representations of women, which omit reference to the reality of female experience. It is this politically laden scenario that feminist writers and critics seek to reveal. They try to bring forth the powers of oppression which work cunningly and viciously. The struggle to achieve self-definition and to break free from the predominantly male power to view ideal womanhood is one which is explored in depth by many feminists. By articulating, women operate a form of resistance to the oppression of patriarchal logic.

The discourse of the blacks underscores the oppression of black men and turns a blind eye to gender oppression. bell hooks remarks:

Oppression of black men during slavery has been described as de-masculinization for the same reason that virtually no scholarly attention has been given to the oppression of black women during slavery. Underlying both tendencies is the sexist assumption that the experiences of men are more important than those of women and that what matters most among the experiences of men is their ability to assert themselves patriarchally. (21-22)

It is a known fact that women, world over, have been subject to suppression and physical and emotional abuse. Besides the problems that are specific to women, the plight of the black woman is even worse as she is subject to abuse by the men of her own community, the White man and the White woman. "Sex assigns Black women to the same category as White women; race assigns them to the same category as Black men." (Gates 179) The Black woman, a slave, is thus, an alienated individual who could not change her social condition and could feel only a sense of individual failure. The complexities of the problems faced by the Afro-American women are highlighted by Walker in her works. She felt the need to portray the women of her community in an honest way, and through her works, try to give voice to a community of voiceless women.

Walker trains her thinking on some of the heinous social practices of the Black patriarchal society, which conspires to keep the woman in a state of perpetual bondage. One of the most barbaric and horrifying practice of genital mutilation is seen in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. Charles R. Larson reveals Walker's intent in a venture like this and says that "Walker and many others rationally believe that the cultural intent of such mutilation is absolutely clear: the denial of pleasure for women from all sexual activity." (Larson 28) Walker wants her readers to know that these practices, however, traditional do irreparable damage to the woman who wears on her person the physical scars of the traditional ritual as well as silently suffering the not so visible but even more traumatizing effects of the act in her mind. Victoria A. Brownworth gives a more graphic account of the painful practice thus:

In some areas, what remains of the genitalia is stitched together or pinned together with thorns in a process called infibulations. Small holes are left for The urine and menstrual flows, but infections are commonplace. (Brownworth 420)

Walker, in an interview with Mary Helen Washington, in “Coping Strategies of the Women in Alice Walker’s Novel: Implications of Survival”, (qtd by Robbie J. Walker) said that “women who are cruelty exploited, spirits and bodies mutilated, relegated to the most harrow and confining lives, [are] sometimes driven to madness.”(Walker 405) It is unthinkable that millions of Black girls have been subjected to the humiliating motions of genital mutilation.

*Possessing the Secret of Joy* depicts female genital mutilation, rape, spousal abuse, infanticide, child marriage and slavery. The novel reveals that the violent acts are imposed upon women around the world. It is a true portrait of psychological, physical and emotional harms imposed upon the Black women and explores the subjugation of women who suffered from this practice of female genital mutilation. The novel’s actions focus on the cultural rite of female circumcision of African-American women and deals with the suppression of women and the environment of misogyny surrounding the practice.

Gender identities and gender relations are determined by the culture of a society and culture makes gender roles meet certain inescapable beliefs, assumptions, expectations, and obligations. Cultural practices are a mark of social group’s identity and assertion. Gender politics camouflaged by cultural norms, governed by patriarchal interests and manifested in cultural practices like female genital mutilation, make the life of women difficult and burdensome. *Possessing the Secret of Joy* discusses this tabooed cultural practice camouflaged by gender politics, used to subjugate women, to protect the interests of men. Walker through the novel puts forth the idea of Judith Butler of how “gender is performatively produced and compelled by regulatory practices of gender coherence . . . constituting the identity it is purported to be.” (34) This novel is an attempt to represent the practices of female circumcision not only as specific cultural practice, but as a symbol for women’s subordination and oppression on a global scale. Walker writes in her epilogue to *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, It is estimated that from ninety to one hundred million women

and girls living today in African, Far Eastern and Middle Eastern countries have been genitally mutilated. Recent articles in the media have reported on the growing practice of 'female circumcision' in the United States and Europe, among immigrants from countries where it is part of the culture. (266) She feels threatened by these media reports on the growing practice of female circumcision. Walker calls this practice as man's eternal desire to have control over woman and through this practice he controls both the body and mind of woman.

Female genital mutilation is described as "a blatant symbol of the oppression of women and the patriarchy's determination to control women's productivity and their sexuality." (4) Fran Hosken says that genital mutilation is a violation of human rights." (10) For Gloria Steinem it is a demonstration of patriarchy at its worst, a metaphor for the "psychic mutilation" that women suffer everywhere at the hands of their male "oppressors." (49) Mary Daly's passionate outcry against what she calls "unspeakable atrocities" in *Gyn/Ecology* names the practices, "for what they are: barbaric and demonic rituals." (154-155) It is considered to be a mark of true womanhood in certain cultures. There is a whirlpool of pain created for women under patriarchy, in the name of cultural loyalty to such practices, devours the lives of many young girls and women. "Genital mutilation of women is really just a part of the global mutilation of women, the terrorisation of women, one of the numerous things done to keep them in their place, under the foot of the dominant patriarchal culture." (Walker & Parmar) The central character, Tashi's voice alternates with that of her best friend and her husband to provide a constant flow of insights into the brutal misogyny suffered by many black women. Walker dedicates, *Possessing the Secret of Joy* "With Tenderness and Respect to the Blameless Vulva." (10) It is an appropriate dedication because the novel is a powerful condemnation of the practice of female circumcision. Walker in an interview with David Bradley inspiringly said: "I was brought up to try to see what was

wrong and right. Since I am a writer, writing is how I right it. I was brought up to look at things that are out of joint, out of balance, and to try to bring them into balance. And as a writer that's what I do..." (370) She stood by what she asserted, when she condemned female genital mutilation through this novel. Walker wrote the entire novel based on the life experiences of women characters maimed and unmade by female genital mutilation to create an awareness about the hazardous effects of the practice on women.

The quest for wholeness which Tashi tries to explore at once reminds Walker of her childhood injury in her right eye, which was deliberately ignored by her parents because this injury was caused by no one else but their own son, Walker's own brother. This 'accident' caused her partial blindness, which touched Walker's spirit. In the book *Warrior Marks* Walker connects her personal physical injury in her right eye which caused a 'hideous scar' with the 'sexual blinding' of African black female. She expresses her sad moments of past as follows:

I was eight when I was injured. This is the age at which many "circumcisions" are done. When I see how the little girls – how small they are! – drag their feet after being wounded. I am reminded of myself. How had I learned to walk again, without constantly walking into something? To see again, using half my vision? Instead of being helped to make this transition, I was banished, set aside from the family, as is true of genitally mutilated little girls. For they must sit for a period alone, their legs bound, as their wound heals. It is taboo to speak of what has been done to them.

(18-19)

Walker makes a connection between hers and the African women's mutilations. Pratibha Parmar gives a pathetic picture of the black female in her outstanding work *Warrior Marks* as follows:

I think of these young girls as little birds whose fragile bodies have been bashed,

whose wings have been clipped before they can discover the power of their own souls and their erotic selves. They've been irrevocably wounded by traditions that cause them much pain and deny them the freedom to fly, to flourish. (NP)

Walker weaves the story in her imaginary place called Olinka in Africa. The novel begins with a dramatic line, "I did not realize for a long time that I was dead." (30) It is a story of a native African woman – Tashi Johnson. Her marriage with Adam force her to leave Olinka and settle in America and is therefore torn between two cultures, Olinkan and Western. Tashi allows herself to be excised and infibulated as part of her expression of cultural independence from British colonialism. However, although Tashi willingly requests to be "bathed" (circumcised) by the tsunga, she does not realize what precisely involves. This is partly due to the fact that discussing the ritual is taboo; it is enshrouded in a silence that helps to keep the practice intact. She does not realize either the physical or psychic damage that would result from the ritual. This reveals the psychological circumcision every girl child undergoes when she thinks of physical circumcision as a part of her upbringing. The ritual is performed when the girl child is too young and in such a practice Tashi's sister Dura dies soon after the ritual. Aware of the incident Tashi volunteers herself to the camp where the ritual is performed by a woman called 'tsunga'. She becomes conscious to the reality about her community, her traditions, and the pain imposed 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) When a girl fails to undergo the ritual she faces lot of problems in her community. A girl who does not take the ritual is refused for marriage by the men of the community and the girl is considered monstrous by her friends. It also becomes an act against the words of their leader who is in prison and who always insist the female children to take up the ritual. The society is patriarchal and thus indirectly forces

the women into the ritual. The pity is that the girl children are taken to the ritual by their mothers and so the male dominated society makes women as a victim to their domination. Moreover talking about the ritual as a taboo, again it is a way to prevent the uncircumcised women from becoming aware of the trauma of the ritual. Though the mothers suffer after the ritual, they take their children to the ritual in fear of their community males, but in the case of Tashi she is not forced by her mother but her blind love for her tradition and culture makes her become a victim of the patriarchal culture.

Tashi chooses to get herself circumcised driven by emotion rather than by intellect. She wants the operation because she recognized it as the only remaining definitive stamp of the Olinka tradition. Tashi's desire to be identified as a typical Olinkan woman paves the way for the ritual:

The operation she'd had done to herself joined her, she felt, to these women, whom she envisioned as strong, invincible. Completely woman. Completely African. Completely Olinka. In her imagination, on her long journey to the camp, they had seemed terribly bold, terribly revolutionary and free. She saw them leaping to the attack. (61)

Tashi even feels proud of her culture. Here and there a defiant cheek bore the mark of her withered tribe. Those marks Tashi says "gave me courage. I wanted such a mark for myself." (23) Tashi's evaluation of the ritual changes completely and takes a different turn once she arrives in the United States. She feels that her choice of undergoing this ritual was wrong. Tashi is no longer cheerful and her movements had become slow and passive. A look into her eyes reveals that her soul had been dealt a mortal blow. She is made to feel little comfortable after her treatment in the United States. The girls and young women who underwent this procedure sometimes died and frequently resulted in medical complications, such as infections and problematic labors. Thus this practice resulted in dysfunctional babies.

Tashi's marriage to Adam and her arrival in the U.S. enables Tashi to look critically at her culture. She realizes that the practice their mothers and foremothers were following was nothing but a barbaric practice – mutilating oneself. Mary Daly describes the elder women of the tribe who take up an active part in mutilating the bodies of their young as “pawns, mentally castrated participants in the destruction of their own kind; the female token torturers.” (165)

Tashi wonders how M'Lissa a woman herself had done excision to other young girls. She feels an urge to avenge for her sister Dura's death. After some days, she shows vigour even in her suffering. She develops faith in herself and is also ready to face any danger to affirm her beliefs:

Unlike the child who could not cry about her sister's death, Tashi now mourns her losses in a healthy manner. She realizes how she has become fragmented from her past-and, although she has reunited her memories to her emotions, it is a repaired union, with the painful stitches marking both the place of division and the place of healing. Tashi regains the vision of one other thing-the fragment of her child self that she lost when she became afraid of taking risks. Once she recalls the details of Dura's murder, she flies to Africa to confront M'Lissa. It is in Africa, before that confrontation, that we find Tashi, reclaiming the bold child-like spirit that she once had. Although she realizes the danger inherent in expressing her anti-government opinions, Tashi chooses to risk that danger in order to declare her beliefs. (4)

Tashi takes up the operation with a sense of deep love for her community but when she becomes aware of the patriarchal culture she turns against such culture. She wonders that the person who administered her own excision is a woman. The question takes her back to Africa, to her Olinkan people and to the resolution of her fate. It's a scary realization not

simply related to Tashi's own culture, but central to images of female victimization worldwide. Thus Tashi says: "We are the perfect audience, mesmerized by our unconscious knowledge of what men, with the collaboration of our mothers, do to us." (131) Cry of her sister at her death-bed lingers in her ears and she is psychologically affected turning her anger towards the tsunga who performed the ritual on her. Tashi's agony makes her turn against both the Olinkan nation and the Olinkan woman, M'Lissa (tsunga) – both victim and sadist – who circumcised Tashi at her own request. Tsunga, the old lady is honored by her people for protecting their culture and serving their community. Legitimization of M'Lissa's position as a socially respected person and the legal authority she enjoys reflects the ideological basis that female circumcision has acquired down the ages among the black people and some others elsewhere around the world. But Tashi has her vengeance against her community by murdering the tsunga and ruins herself and her family by submitting to the tradition blindly.

Tashi is convicted of the murder and put in prison. While in prison Mbatu reads out a passage from a book of a White colonialist author. It says that Black people possess the secret of joy, which is why they can survive the suffering and humiliation inflicted upon them. Mbatu promises to find out and reveal to Tashi the definitive secret of joy before she dies. Tashi is ordered to be hanged to death. She refuses to be blindfolded during her execution so that she can see far in all directions and concentrate on the beauty of one blue hill in the distance. She says that for her that moment will be eternity. Thus Walker characterises Tashi-Evelyn as a martyr and draws attention to the cause. Olinkan women come together to defy the death sentence conferred on her. Tashi by the end of the novel realizes that "RESISTANCE IS THE SECRET OF JOY!" (264) Just before Tashi's execution Mbatu, Olivia, Benny and Raye unfurl a banner with the words "RESISTANCE IS THE SECRET OF JOY!"(264) to create an awareness about resisting the procedure. Tashi once has had the secret of joy but she gives up her joy to a traditional practice in the name of culture, which is

male dominated and biased. Resistance here refers to the fortitude of mind, spirit and body that would bring about positive change in one's life. Tashi comes out of pain after being executed and her soul says "I am no more. And satisfied." (265)

Tashi, though dead, has been saved. And because she is dead, others like her will be saved. Walker speaks on the behalf of those African women who have not yet seen light. She hopes to enlighten people through this novel. Walker suggests in *Warrior Marks*:

I always tell women when they start reading my book that if the going gets rough, they should just put it aside and not try to press on. Because it is a lot to take in if you are not really in touch with your own feelings. If you are not in touch with your feelings, then you can read it as a kind of intellectual exercise. But many women really are not able to do that, and I am happy that they are not, because it means that they are alive. (WM 272)

The point about the universality of female mutilation and domination is especially important, as is the hopeful message that these and other oppressive practices are being fought on many fronts by dedicated, determined activists like Walker and Parmar as well as by other survivors. Walker's final words in "Like the Pupil of an Eye" are an encouraging note to end on:

Those of us who are maimed can tell you it is possible to go on. To flourish. To grow. To love and be loved, which is the most important thing. (WM 19)

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