

**STRUGGLE OF A WOMAN AGAINST THE CULTURE OF SEXISM IN ALICE WALKER'S *POSSESSING THE SECRET OF JOY*.**

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**ABSTRACT**

In all of her novels Alice Walker, the eminent Black feminist writer examines black woman's struggle; the courageous fight she puts up against a racist and sexist society that stifles her growth towards self-hood, independence and wholeness. Her novels vividly document the struggle of the protagonists to come to terms with reality to resist and withstand, and to rediscover and redefine them. This paper however confines itself to one of her novels named *Possessing the Secret of Joy* alone. This novel was published in the year 1992, which centers around female circumcision also known as clitoridectomy which is celebrated as the rite of initiation into womanhood among many African tribes. The novel deals with the main protagonist Tashi's ill-fated decision, the traumatic experience, her descent into depression and madness and the efforts of her well-wishers to heal her and then her resolution to face the reality, her own act of her personal redemption- her vengeance on M'Lissa, the aged circumciser of the Olinka village, and finally embracing her death triumphantly.

**Key Words:** Genital mutilation, circumcision, discrimination, domination.

**Abbreviation:** PSJ- Possessing the Secret of Joy

Alice Walker was born on February 9, 1944 in Eatonton, Georgia as the eighth child of poor couple Willie Lee Walker and Minnie Lou Tallulah Grant. Her father was a sharecropper and had a very poor earning. As a result her mother had to work very hard to increase the family income. For Alice, mother had always been a source of inspiration. Walker says “my mother adorned with flowers whatever house we were forced to live in, “and whatever Rocky soil she landed on she turned into a garden.” (In Search of My Mother’s Garden, 24). Alice Walker says that her inspiration and her role model in her writings are her mother and Zora Neale Hurstone. As Zora Neale Hurstone had faced severe poverty, racism and gender discrimination throughout her life, Walker also had to face such discrimination being an African woman living in America. It was Walker’s mother who motivated her to be a writer and gave her consent for the same. Walker does not completely identify herself with the literature of white people as for her white culture is entirely different from the culture of her own.

Alice Walker is the first African American woman to win Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and the National Book Award for her novel *The Color Purple*. Her writings mainly explore gender and racial discrimination. Through her writings, Walker tries to find out what actually lies behind such discrimination. In the present novel through the character of protagonist Tashi, Walker shows the miserable condition of black woman and the culture under patriarchal society which keep woman in the subordinate position to prove male’s superiority. But Tashi is strong enough to prove that she has the capacity to possess everything in her life. Tashi offers arguments on the rituals and customs of her tribe and and comes to a very shocking revelation. She then makes up

her mind to avenge the person who had been an instrument of the sufferings and deaths of female of her community. Walker's heroines had the courage to right the wrong done to them.

The novel *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, Published in 1992, centres around female genital mutilation which is celebrated as the rite of initiation into womanhood among many African tribes. The novel deals with the main protagonist Tashi's ill-fated decision to go for genital mutilation, the traumatic experience, her descent into depression and madness due to genital mutilation. Walker in her book *Anything We Love can be Saved* writes about the harmful effect of genital mutilation:

Genital mutilation is a mental and physical health hazard that directly affects some one hundred million women and girls worldwide, alive today, to whom it has been done. Because of increased risk of trauma during delivery, it affects the children to whom they give birth. Indirectly because of its linkage to the spread of AIDS, especially among women and children, it affects the health and well being of everyone on the planet(P.111).

In *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, Alice Walker shows that the young African tribal girls have to suffer the consequences of female circumcision throughout their lives. An African girl has to undergo such an operation of mutilation "Either shortly after birth or at the age of five or six, but certainly by the onset of puberty, ten or eleven". (PSJ.62). The instruments which are used for this purpose are extremely horrible. The little girls are "being forced under the shards of unwashed glass, tin can tops, rusty razors and dull knives of traditional circumcisers".(PSJ.282). Such a crude operation which sometimes bleeds the innocent little girls to death is considered as a sacred act. Tashi, the heroine of the novel remembers the horrible, hair-raising process of female circumcision when Dura, her sister was taken to in an isolated hut in order to perform the

operation on her body. There “Dura was being held down and tortured inside hut” (PSJ.73). Tashi was hidden in the elephant grass. She was hearing the inhuman shrieks of Dura that rent the air and chilled her heart. Abruptly there was silence inside. Dura was “bled and bled and bled and then there was death. No one was responsible. No one to blame”. (PSJ.81). The mother has taken Dura inside the hut for the mutilation which has made her silent. Walker in the book *Warrior Marks: Female Genital Mutilation and the Sexual Blinding of Women* talks about the betrayal of mother:

But the mother’s betrayal of the child is one of the cruelest aspects of it. Children place all their love and trust in their mothers. When you think of the depth of the betrayal of the child’s trust. This is an emotional wounding, which will never go away. The sense of betrayal, the sense of not being able to trust anyone, will stay with the child as she grows up (P.274).

Such anti-life and anti-human traditions of black society turn the life of a female into a chain of not only physical but spiritual pain too. Such practices forbid a female to live a life on her own terms. Tashi, who has a bubbling spirit to live a life on her own terms, also suffers because of the social traditions of circumcision and scarification not only physically but emotionally, spiritually and psychologically also. As Tashi passionately falls in love with Adam, a missionary and her mother is also influenced by Black American missionaries, Tashi is not circumcised at puberty. But after the declaration of Olinka’s imprisoned leader that ‘No Olinkan man would even think of marrying a woman who has not circumcised.’ (PSJ.121). She defiantly decides to submit herself to the hands of the ancient honoured ‘tsunga M’Lissa, a woman who has severed the vulvae of hundreds of little girls, thrown the insignificant morsel out the door to the waiting chickens and sewn the girls back up.

After scarification and circumcision, Tashi's life changes greatly. Her journey of life moves from a state of independent and strong woman to a weak person who is a victim under the domination of traditions of her community. She moves to an Mbele camp where after a long persistent search Adam gets her in a very miserable condition. He is shocked to find Tashi lying on a filthy mat in an Olinkan Mbele camp, her legs bound, flies swarming around her fresh facial and genital wounds. Her whole physical system gets disturbed.

It now took a quarter of an hour for her to pee. Her menstrual periods lasted ten days. She was incapacitated by cramps nearly half the month. There were premenstrual cramps: cramps caused by the near possibility of flow passing through so tiny an aperture as M'Lissa had left, after fastening together the raw sides of Tashi's vagina with a couple of thrones and inserting a straw so that in healing, the traumatized flesh might not grow together, shutting the opening completely; cramps caused by the residual flow that could not find its way out, was not reabsorbed into her body and had nowhere to go. There was the odor too, of soured blood, which no amount of scrubbing until we got to American ever washed off (PSJ.64).

Now suffering from a strange kind of pain Tashi is left merely a body without soul. Since her childhood a black woman is made to think that a woman can enjoy physical pleasure when she gets the pain of stitching her vagina a number of times in her life. Tashi does not suffer only physically but Alice Walker shows how the genital mutilation becomes a root cause of her psychological trauma and permanently damages her psychology. Because of the genital mutilation, Tashi does not lose only an important part of her body but her very soul is lost and she suffers for the rest of her life. Throughout her life, she never grows able to come out of these

feelings. Her vagina is sewn so tightly that the passage has become very narrow and every act of love making gives her intense pain. Thus the natural sexual desires cause psychological problem in her. This leads her to associate her sexual life with this pain. Tina Mcelroy Ansa says: “Tashi not only “has a scar between her legs, but one as deep on her psyche as well. The circumcision has not only cut away her clitoris and the possibility of love-making that is very painful and humiliating. It has also eradicated her sense of self and her ability to feel” (P.33).

After her marriage with Adam and renamed as Evelyn in America, Tashi undergoes a fundamental personality change. She finds neither peace nor happiness. Sexually dead and unable to face the reality Tashi makes her own fantasy life. She starts wondering in her dream world. Having a feeling of melancholy and depression she begins to think herself being imprisoned in a dark and tall tower and her wings have been broken. She grows so aggressive and violent without any cause that she tries to use violence on others as well as on herself. She sometimes wants to mutilate herself. She keeps herself away from human contact for a long time. Adam always had sympathy for her. He was unable to penetrate her for three months. Whenever he would touch her, she bled. He was unable to do anything to her. She is so traumatized that she is absolutely unaware of what she is doing. She frequently and with little cause or no cause boxes Beny, her retarded son's ears. When for the first time Tashi comes to know about Lisette's pregnancy from Adam, she at once loses her control and desires to kill herself and her retarded son Benny and from the very day of Lisette's son Pierre's birth she starts collecting stones in order to kill him and when adult Pierre comes to meet his father, Tashi loses her control over herself. As soon as he gets down from the taxi and sees Tashi and smiles, Tashi begins to throw stones on him. Walker shows how Tashi's repressed grief over her sister Dura's death due to

genital mutilation and her own suffering and pain makes her mentally disturbed and she uses violence against herself and others. These are the pains and sufferings which she cannot share with anyone and always haunts of the fits of melancholy and depression.

It is only during her treatment by Mzee, the doctor of soul, Tashi comes to know the cause of her anxiety for the first time. Now she begins to revive the memories of her sister Dura's death which she has suppressed. She visualizes each and every incident and recalls women's participation in Dura's murder. It is a part of walker's authorial pronouncement on the hierarchy of oppression with women's colluding with men against other women and therefore participating in their own oppression in a male dominated society. Indeed, later M'Lissa confesses to Tashi that her mother Catherine had helped to hold Dura for the operation and killed her. After analyzing the cause of her anxiety, Tashi soon feels comfortable and relax. She starts weeping: "I remembered my sister. Dura's..., my sister Dura's..., I could get no further. There was a boulder lodged in my throat. My heart surged pitiful. I knew what the boulder was, that it was a word; and that behind that word I would find my earliest emotions" (PSJ.80-81). These are the emotions that have frightened her to the point of insanity. She has always thought of Dura's demise. "She'd simply died. She'd bled and bled and bled and then there was death. No one was responsible. No one to blame" (PSJ.81). But then suddenly she utters, " Dura's murder" (PSJ.81). As soon as she utters these words, exploding the boulder, she feels a painful stitched throughout her body that "I knew stitched my tears to my soul' (PSJ.81). Now death of Dura becomes her murder. Her way of thinking is changed. She begins to think that Dura's death is not natural rather a murder and Tsunga is the murderer in her eyes. Tsunga represents the whole Olinkan community's custom to circumcise the female genital organs in order to keep a black female

under male's control.

Thus Alice walker very clearly shows how the pains the genital mutilation are sometimes too deep for its female victims to survive. The pains, sufferings and the repressed feelings of Dura's unnatural death, all caused by female circumcision are responsible for Tashi's depression, melancholy, disturbed psychology and her almost insane condition. Her disturbed mentality and the repressed feelings of her sister's murder became the root cause of violence in her which she uses on herself as well as on others. Tashi is pitted against the oppressive and exploitative forces of the society which seek to manipulate her life wholly. These rigid customs of the society demand complete conformity from its female members.

In fact walker suggests that the custom of the circumcision of female genital organs in black society is used as a strategy to insist a female to become a slave of man. Such type of customs restricts the life of a black female. The causes and consequences of these practices in a black community are to ensure the position of woman as an inferior being. Tsunga, a professional circumciser who is used as a tool by the society to circumcise female genital parts also goes bitter when she is asked by Tashi about the validity and justice of the practice. Even Tsunga does accept it as a sacred act but thinks Tashi as a great fool and rebukes her for her coming to get her body circumcised. The superficiality of the imprisoned Olinkan leader's announcement is revealed by Tsunga in a very bitter voice, "Did your leader not keep his penis?"(PSJ.238). But women are too cowardly to look behind a smiling face. And they go on to make them tighter than before and after each birth of a child they do it. "More than once, more than twice, more than three times, they've had it done. Each time tighter than before" (PSJ.240). Although it hurts women very much but, Tsunga says, that "they are used to it because their men like it tight" (PSJ. 240). This is the way that a woman is imprisoned by a man. Now Tashi

understands what actually lies behind such type of customs- it is the domination of women by men who can not tolerate a woman establishing her identity and any type of freedom of a woman is considered by man as a danger to his own position in the family and in the society. And a woman has to suffer too much in the name of customs and traditions. The society imposes its traditions and customs on an individual especially on a female and forbids her to live a natural life by controlling her body, mind and soul. It becomes the lot of a female that she must endure the pains and sufferings as a sacred duty given to her on her body, mind and soul by the society. Now Tashi realises that "the connection between mutilation and enslavement that is at the root of the domination of women in the world" (PSJ. 137). She feels that through these customs and traditions man ensures his power and his superiority over woman. And a woman is not given any right to protest against these injustices. A black female is discriminated on the basis of her sex and thus denied the natural right of having her due share in the society. All the powers and rights are usurped by men and women are given just duties and responsibilities. Alice Walker brings out the male chauvinism governing the strictures of power in African community. Her mind and imagination have very powerfully been captured by the customs, traditions and the systems of the black society which make the role and position of a woman even worse than an animal. All kinds of freedom are denied to her. She knows very well that these customs, traditions and rituals of the society are designed to keep her in control of man physically, mentally and spiritually.

Walker, in *Possessing the Secret of Joy* not only describes the traumatized mind, soul and body of Tashi but also presents her heroic struggle against authoritarian male chauvinism embodied in the forms of customs and traditions of society. Tashi not only suffers pains and mutilation because of the customs and traditions which society imposes on a female in order to make male powerful and keep full control over female but after the awakening and knowing the real nature

of the implication of these customs and traditions of the society specially on its female members, challenges them and comes to the conclusion that "RESISTANCE IS THE SECRET OF JOY!" (PSJ. 279) "The novel catalogues her descent into madness, her long fight to salvage and reconstruct a self, her returns to Africa, her final costly liberation and her discovery that "resistance is the secret of joy".

Tashi suffers physically and psychologically because of circumcision. But when she begins to awaken to the truth about her society, her culture and the pain inflicted on women, she confesses, "I was crazy", for as she goes to have her face scarred with identifying tribal marks. After becoming aware of what men in collaboration with women do to their own daughters, she begins to react sensitively and strongly against the practice of female genital mutilation, which takes a woman away from her own 'self and forbids her to live a normal life on her own terms. Now Tashi no more remains submissive and blind to the customs and slogans of her community. She comes to realize that to live a life of one's own is the legitimate right of every individual. She becomes aware of her own strength and takes a very crucial decision and implements it with a strong will and resolution. An adult and awakened Tashi returns to Africa to seek vengeance on M'Lissa, whom she considers responsible for the mutilation of millions of girls and for the death of Dura and who by mutilating Tashi's genital parts has killed her many years ago. But with the conversation with M'Lissa she comes to know that M'Lissa has only been a tool of society that needs her help to keep women under men and the customs and traditions which society make are examples of male-chauvinism. Tashi's final act of defiance- a part of her understanding of her ordeal: "The connection between mutilation and enslavement that is at the root of the domination of women in the world" (PSI. 137) is a chilling realization, not simply related to Tashi's own culture, but control to image of female victimization worldwide. At this chilling realization Tashi

is shocked. She not only begins to hate Tsunga but strongly determines to struggle against the system which has victimized many Tashis for ages. And Tashi Kills M'Lissa. She is arrested and tried as a murderer of T'sunga, a national property.

During her trials Tashi shows her anger against male chauvinistic society in which, it is man who holds the reins of political power as well as those of the machinery of justice. The pain, suffering and the torture which Tashi suffers because of circumcision have no meaning for them. Tashi who has been killed by Tsunga many years ago, is insignificant for them. They just pass the judgement of Tashi's execution by the firing squad. But ultimate victory goes to Tashi. She is very happy to be executed, because she thinks that her execution will relieve her from the constant torture of her genital circumcision. The real victory of Tashi over the cruel practice of such systems of the society comes when Mbatia who has long remained in the company of Tsunga comes to know how Tsunga has helped the male members of the society to dominate women by mutilating their genital parts and in this way depriving them of their due rights to live a life of wholeness and freedom, joins Tashi. Mbatia also begins to feel like Tashi that women will have to stand up for freedom and justice. Men will never come forward to save women from these unending assaults of the society.

Like Tashi, Walker believes that if women wait for men to act, they may have to wait forever. Even Adam, as sympathetic as he is to Tashi's condition, refuses to discuss the question of her mutilation publically, because he is ashamed to do so. It's a matter of getting the taboo in the consciousness of those who are unaware of the practice. As Tashi concludes, "if we do not, Africa may well be depopulated of black people in our grand children's lifetime, and the worldwide suffering of our children will continue to be our curse"(PSJ.275). The greatest victory over her oppressors which Walker shows in case of Tashi is the way women come to watch her

execution defying male authority of the state trying to scare them away and the way Adam, Oliva, Benny, Pierre, Raye, Mbatia come with a banner writing: "RESISTANCE IS THE SECRET OF JOY" (PSJ. 279). Thus Tashi lights a flame in the spirits of all to struggle, to resist against their oppressions and she becomes a source of encouragement and strength for others.

Alice Walker's writings reveal not only the degrading condition of a Black woman but also expose her heroic struggle to break all the taboos of her own community which in the name of religion and culture restrict a woman to think and act freely. She says that true happiness cannot be achieved when body is tortured in the name of culture. A true culture always brings harmony between body and soul. A culture which brings destruction should be rooted out. Through Tashi's example Walker motivates women, especially black women, to raise their voice for their rights and reject any tradition or culture which degrades them. Walker says that life can be enjoyed truly by being true to oneself and advocates revolt as a necessary tool to be with one.

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