

OPEN ACCESS

Manuscript ID:
ENG-2022-10034914

Volume: 10

Issue: 3

Month: June

Year: 2022

P-ISSN: 2320-2645

E-ISSN: 2582-3531

Received: 10.04.2022

Accepted: 13.05.2022

Published: 01.06.2022

Citation:

Birtia, Geetanjali. "Tradition: Trauma in Alice Walker's Possessing the Secret Joy." *Shanlax International Journal of English*, vol. 10, no. 3, 2022, pp. 27–31.

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.34293/english.v10i3.4914>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License

Tradition: Trauma in Alice Walker's Possessing the Secret Joy

Geetanjali Birtia

Lecturer in English, Karanjia Autonomus College, Karanjia, Odisha, India

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9241-6980>

Abstract

Tradition, culture, religion all these are too much cling to human life and society. Traditions, cultures include some events, customs, rituals of the society. Most of the society of different countries set many events, customs and rituals to be performed by women. And when it is about African American women, who have been discriminated throughout ages for their race class and gender. The women are underrated, marginalized in the society. They are treated as slaves under go many struggles i.e. race, class, gender discrimination. These women are deprived of their basic rights. By maintaining the values of the tradition these women forget the value of their own Life, Identity and Body. They have been affected psychologically and also faces trauma. To bring all the truth behind the traditions and to emancipate these women, some African-American women writers come to the front and make these African-American women realise about their self-esteem, selfhood through their writers. They paved way for the liberation of African-American women. Among the praiseworthy writers Alice Walker is another, who is not only a writer, but also an activist. She rises voice for the betterment and settlement of subjugated women. This paper brings light on the horrible practice of Female Genital Mutilation in Alice Walker's Possessing the Secret of Joy. Removing female genital parts for the pleasure of man and in the name of tradition which brings trauma to the African women.

Keywords: Trauma, Marginalized, Identity, Subjugation, Oppression, Female Circumcision (FGM)

The African writers in America have their own literary style and contents. Alice Walker, a black writer, shows her concern for the black community in America. She mainly writes about the struggle of black women specially in her fifth novel *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992) focuses about the suffering and the breaking of taboos. This novel is a dual exercise in reading culture. 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. On the name of tradition female circumcision is performed, a custom in which women's Vagina is operate and tightened to make more enjoyable for men. This novel Possessing the secret of Joy 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.

Walker relies upon sexual violence and verbal abuse on black people. Walker 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 classism, while black women have had to struggle with racism, classism, 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. They are culturally bound to accept all roles assigned as per their gender. The women in this condition lose their identity.

Walker's dominant themes in her novels are spiritual survival and individual identity as well as freedom, power and community. Walker's heritage and history provide a vehicle for understanding the modern world in which her characters live. In her work she vividly presents the observation of black self-hatred and destruction. Walker believes that as a writer she must work towards a large dimension. As an activist cum writer cum socialist cum poet Alice Walker filters many deep and dense issues like Female Genital mutilation, face scaring, Famine problems etc in her different works. The protagonist of the novel suffers psychologically when she perceives that her sense of identity is being dissolved amid new western values and beliefs. The traumatic heroine of the novel, with the time and experiences of her life, learns that white is not the criminal this time; rather she discovers that African tribalism and sexism are responsible for her psychological disasters with her predicament consisting of her renouncing the egoism and the false pride of African tribalism.

The practice of female genital mutilation is not a tradition which started with the advent of Islam. Due to obsessive preoccupation with virginity and chastity that characterize Islamic societies, the custom of female genital circumcision adapted perfectly to the demands of such religion. The religions which adhere to the practice include Muslims, Christians and Jews as well as the age-old traditional African religion. Some religious believers mark this type of custom for women to get rid of the dirty parts in their bodies, as if women need a purification of their body to satisfy the men. Removing the body parts can make a "real" woman in fact vulva look ugly and circumcision is the only practice which provides aesthetic pleasure. It is performed as a way to diminish the sexual desire of women. The practice of FGC is found primarily in African countries (in 28 countries out of 43) being Sudan the largest country and among a few where the practices are more severe.

"Tashi" the protagonist of the novel, *Possessing the secret of Joy* published in the year 1992. 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*. 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. The traumatic situation snatches her own identity and self. She is unable to feel herself and can't recognize what she actually wants. 'Female Genital Mutilation' is also known as FGM, a very painful ritual and procedure considered to be the true denotation of true femininity and women hood in certain cultures. As a ritual it is practiced in many countries in Africa, Asia, Middle East, America, South America and Australia. FGM is conducted from day after birth to puberty. The procedures differ from country to country, ethnic groups to ethnic groups. The classification of FGM is:

Type-1

Type-1 is partial or total removal of the clitoral glans. It involves removal of the clitoral hood. The circumciser pulls the clitoral glans with her thumb and index finger and cuts it off. Type 1b (clitoridectomy) is the more common procedure.

Type-2

Type -2 is the complete or partial removal of the inner labia. Without removal of the clitoral glans and outer labia. Type 2a is removal of the inner labia, type 2b is removal of clitoral glans and inner labia, type 2c is removal of clitoral glans inner and outer labia.

Type-3

The "sewn closed" category is removal of external genitalia and fusion of the wound. In type-3 a single hole of 2.3mm is left for the passage of urine and menstrual fluid. The vulva is closed with surgical thread, or acacia thorns. After the procedure the vagina is opened for sexual intercourse for the first time either by a midwife with a knife or by the women's husband with his penis.

Type-4

Type-4 includes pricking, piercing, incising, scraping and cauterizing. Labia stretching is also categorized as type-4.

These are the different types of FGM procedure. It is not only a tradition or custom or ritual to control women under patriarchy but also it is a great pain and

shame to the human race. In the name of culture and tradition women are cut, pricked, pierced, scraped, nicked, burned, scarred only to give satisfaction and feeling of superiority to the men. It is only practiced due to gender inequality and to control women's sexuality and also to make women pure, modest and beautiful, which is absolutely a false and man-made view.

Tradition is a word that has too often been used to exclude or misrepresent women. It is always something of a shock to see black women, sharing equally in the labour and strife of black people expunged from the text when that history becomes shaped into tradition. Tradition practice of female genital mutilation is not a tradition which started with the advent of Islam. However, due to the obsessive preoccupation with virginity and chastity that characterises Islamic societies, the custom of FGM adapted perfectly to the demands of such religion. The Afro-American women go through as much as physical and psychological pain and suffering for they are the victims of both patriarchal and racial discrimination and abuse. They suffer from double in some cases triple marginalization. Their life journey starts from pain, suffering, hope. They all struggle for common reasons, fight for a better tomorrow. In a patriarchal ideology women are restricted by religion, the patriarchal system, their gender and many other barriers. Women are not free to do anything they like, they can't think on their own, can't make any decisions, can't conform to their wishes, can't go anywhere, can't do anything for themselves, everything related to them is monitored by men.

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 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 talun 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". By telling the story of a Panda who has a co-wife, she initiated her story. Many a time Tashi tassel 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 to that race, where for the women marriage is more important than life, education, career or anything else of the world. Tashi 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 accepts us as we are? Never to intimate any of our ways?"

It is always we who have to Change

The Olinka people believe in certain tradition such as female genital mutilation and facial scarification, an act, they call it as their tradition when both men and women scar their faces which shows that they are obviously uneducated and superstitious. When the white people attack the village, the Olinka people are forced to live in the forest. They believe that though they have lost their homes, they should keep alive their tradition. So, the Olinkan men with the help of older women M'Lissa, an old circumciser who forces young girls to submit to female genital mutilation (FGM). Although 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 in side her. Tashi faces worst result of FGM. When she delivers a baby boy-Benny who is mentally challenged and causes only and only due to FGM. Gradually Tashi's marital life is overshadowed by her ill mental and physical health cause due to circumcision she has undergone. Then Tashi wonders why women are force to perform female genital mutilation and why it is a taboo in some societies to talks 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 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 his sons to save her. She is finally executed.

Tashi 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". (king242) 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" (PSJ 237). Circumcision hurts not only the woman but also the child she may carry. Tashi has a son, named Benny Johnson. He is presented here as a mentally retired 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 enough mature 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 just thinks it's her own culture and goes for it, which is proven as a big insane thing. 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". When a person starts going through the stage of mental illness then if even, she hurts her then she will not feel any pain at all.

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. (PSJ 208)

Alice Walker is considered to be the first African American women writer to talk about the female genital mutilation in her novel *Possessing the Secret*

of Joy. To her cultural, Traditional belief related to women only is a kind of tortures, it cannot be called as traditional. Through the protagonist Tashi, Walker puts forth the problem and trauma faced by African women in the practice of tradition. By the storylines and characters, she creates a kind of awareness among the readers. Walker desires for the women, the opportunities of education, prevailing of humanitarian social customs and traditions and wellbeing of all people, Male and Female.

References

- Christian, Barbara. *Black Feminist Novelists: The Development of a tradition, 1892-1976*. Greenwood Press, 1980.
- Hasanthi, Dhawaleswarapu Ratna. "Gender Politics and Women in Alice Walker's Possessing the Secret of Joy." *Journal of English Language and Literature*, vol. 5, no. 3, 2018, pp. 42-48.
- Hurston, Zora Neale. *Their Eyes were Watching God*. General Press, 2020.
- Majid, Basma. "Feminism in Alice Walker's Possessing the Secret of Joy." *Smart Moves Journal IJELLH*, vol. 8, 2020, pp. 10-22.
- Suresh, P., and P. Anuradha. "A Critical Study on Psychological Trauma in Alice Walker's Possessing the Secret of Joy." *International Journal of Recent Technology and Engineering*, vol. 7, 2019, pp. 282-286.
- Walker, Alice, and Pratibha Parmar. *Warrior Marks: Female Genital Mutilation and the Sexual Blinding of Women*. Amistad, 1996.
- Walker, Alice. *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992.
- Walker, Alice. *The Color Purple: A Novel*. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983.
- "Female Genital Mutilation." *Wikipedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Female_genital_mutilation

Author Details

Geetanjali Birtia, Lecturer in English, Karanjia Autonomus College, Karanjia, Odisha, India

Email ID: geetanjaliBirtia@gmail.com