

The Cultural Impact and Issues of Female Genital Mutilation in Alice Walker's Possessing The Secret of Joy

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Abstract

Alice Walker was an American writer, the first African American woman to win the Pulitzer prize for Fiction in 1982 which she was awarded for her novel The Color Purple. This paper focuses on (FGM) Female Genital Mutilation in Possessing the Secret of Joy.

Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) is a procedure performed on a girl or woman to modify her genitalia for non-scientific reasons. It most usually entails the partial or overall elimination of the outside genitalia. FGM is a contravention of women's essential human rights.

The reason behind the practice (FGM) varies in some African culture and it is seen as a religious belief. Tashi is a minor character in The Color Purple, the protagonist of the novel Possessing the Secret of Joy and undergoes the female genital mutilation (FGM) as a part of ritual practice.

Keywords: FGM, Identity Crisis, Insanity, Culture, Circumcision, Frustration.

Writings by people of African heritage residing in the United States are identified to as African American Literature. African American Literature focus on themes of Black folks, Afro-American culture, racism, religion, slavery, freedom and equality.

Lale Demirturk in his article, The Black Woman's Selfhood in Alice Walker's Possessing the Secret of Joy, he discusses the black community, particularly about how black women identify their selfhood. Feminism in Alice Walker's Possessing the Secret of Joy in this article Basma Majad examines discrimination, suffering, and how African American women were oppressed by men. Niment Kaya Karadag in his article How Female Genital Mutilation Ruins a Life: Tashi's story in Possessing the Secret of Joy. He explores the reasons behind cultural practice, female genital mutilation, and their sexual and social life. Santhosh Kumari in her article Tribal Frenzy in Alice Walker's Possessing the Secret of Joy discusses how woman are exploited in the name of culture, and she also examines their filthy practice of genital circumcision.

Alice Walker's works mostly depict the violence against black community, sexual abuse, racism, identity crisis particularly in African American society and their blind culture. In this novel Possessing the Secret of Joy, Alice Walker depicts the struggles of African black girl Tashi and the story revolves around Tashi who undergoes female genital mutilation. The novel begins when Tashi, a young girl was mentally and physically affected. Because of the blind cultural practices, Tashi loses her sister Dura.

In the beginning, Tashi was saved by Christian missionaries from female genital mutilation. This novel mirrors the tribalism of African culture. As Tashi gets education, she is punished and a scar is made on her face. So as she is prevented from coming out of her house and feels ashamed of her scar. This novel picturizes how women are treated, and depicts these practices as part of their rituals.

After she marries Adam, they move to America. As an African tribal woman, she is trapped between two different cultures and Tashi tries to find her identity as she has adopted the cultures, and she feels disconnected from her culture as a tribal woman. It is clearly portrayed that Tashi is away from her cultural practices which brings forth mental trauma leading to identity crisis and insanity, which may produce mental illness and make one to be unable to cope up with uncertainty in determining her identity. As she has been caught between two cultures and has been thinking of her true identity, she decides to restore her identity by doing female circumcision. Olivia Tashi's friend who is against her decision and she advises her not to do female circumcision. But Tashi is not convinced and returns to Olinka to do the female circumcision by the Olinkan M'Lissa who circumcises the young Olinkan girls. Tashi believes that this female circumcision can restore her identity as it is portrayed as an identity of the African culture.

Later she feels insane and suffers because of female genital mutilation at her later stage which results in internal illness. In this novel, Alice Walker has illustrated the horrors of female circumcision followed by Africans. Tashi, an ethnical black woman, is affected psychologically because of psychological trauma. The terrible cultural practices make women insane and exploit in the name of rituals. It is an archetypal myth which is repeatedly occurring in the lives of African women.

The tribes believe that their women should feel ashamed of the scar by force as punishment for their mistakes. Some tribal men in the village will also be scarred on their face when they do something wrong and they believe that Olinkan women must endure these bodily wounds as their cultural practices. This Olinkan tribe believes that this female circumcision makes them different from other tribes.

This is the reason why the female folks of the tribe are forced to endure this cultural practices. In this novel, Tashi is subjected to a cruel form of genital removal in her later age which takes her into frustration, after she undergoes the female circumcision and she realises the horrors and sufferings that every African woman undergoes which is the cruellest example of exploiting women in the name of ritual. Because of her frustration, the protagonist Tashi decides to kill M'Lissa, the woman who does circumcision for young Olinkan girls. Only because of the cultural practice she loses her sister Dura which affects Tashi psychologically and she starts thinking about why African tribes are following this rituals. She searches for the reason behind the blind cultural practices and at the end of the novel she realises that standing against these kinds of practices is the greatest joy of life.

This novel depicts how women are affected by the worst ritual practices that exist in society and creates an identity crisis among women. Female genital mutilation leads to evil effects at both the physical and psychological level which further leads to insanity.

Conclusion

It is understood that how cultural practices impact the society in general and individuals in particular. The protagonist Tashi is the best example to showcase her suffering in the name of culture and rituals which create identity crisis, insanity, psychological and physiological trauma. Through this novel Alice Walker explores and depicts the pathetic situation endured by African women. As the protagonist, Tashi tries to kill the lady M'Lissa, one who does female circumcision for Olinkan girls. Alice Walker reveals her mind to abolish these kinds of practices which affect women in many ways. One could understand that by killing the one who practises the culture can bring a solution to the problem. This paper from the novel has analysed the novel on the basis of the sufferings endured by African women in order to keep their identity. Alice Walker breaks this myth and make African women realize the truth about the culture and rituals which should be eradicated from the African society.

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