

A Critical Study on Psychological Trauma in Alice Walker's *Possessing the Secret of Joy*

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Abstract--- African American women have been discriminated throughout the ages. They have been considered as least being by their own community people. These women were marginalized in the society and are treated as slaves, they undergo struggles in class, race, gender discrimination. African American women were represented in the way of the oppressed class who have always been a subject of men's domination. They are suppressed in many aspects, they are also misrepresented in society. African American women are denied from their basic rights, they are totally excluded from social, economic and political rights. Women of African American were kept dumb by which they forget the value of their self. They have been affected psychologically and in need of emancipation. African American women writers contributed their writing for racial and gender equality. They fought bravely against the structures of patriarchy through their writings. The main theme of their writings is self-esteem, self-realization, the importance of regaining their rights and achieving their 'self'. There are many black women writers in literature, some of them are Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou, Maria Stewart, Deborah Gray-White, Zora Neal Hurston, Alice Walker and so many. These writers paved way for the liberation of African American women, some of the writers are activist who fought for the freedom of women domination. This paper is going to deal with one of the writers mentioned above; Alice Walker, not only a writer but also an activist fought for the Southern women freedom. This paper focuses on the issue of removing female circumcision in Alice Walker's *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. The author portrays her fictional women character Tashi in this novel, who face endless struggle after female circumcision. The aim of this paper is to show how these African women are traumatized by the name of tradition and culture.

Keywords--- Gender discrimination, sexual identity, subjugation, oppression, awakening, female circumcision.

I. INTRODUCTION

Alice Walker an internationally acclaimed writer of 20th century. In the history of African American literature, she is the first women writer to win Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award in 1983 for her novel *The Color Purple*. She is one of the most popular Afro American black women writers in the contemporary period. As a writer, she knows the powerfulness of the writing; she took this writing as a tool and medium to cultivate patriarchy awareness. Race, gender, class and identity have been themes of Alice Walker. She writes for the upliftment of the black women. Not only Walker, but most of the black writer also writes for the black woman identity. Her envision is to free black women from every aspect of domination, through her writing she creates social awareness among people and makes them realize the importance of women in society. All her writings focus on social problems such as race, class,

gender discrimination and gender oppression. Her writing also comprises the solution of the oppressive condition and the need to create self-identity. Her theme is always on individual identity which links her to the literary heritage of black writers. The importance she gives for the upliftment of black life makes her a representative of American life.

Walker relies upon sexual violence and verbal abuse on black people. Walker through the novel has put forth that the Civil Rights Movement has been one of utmost turmoil and upheaval for blacks in America, as they fought for their rights, against white, supremacist society. Black men have had to only fight with racism, while black women have had to fight with racism and sexism within and outside the movement. Walker has envisioned that real changes in the black community can only happen when the community itself undergoes a social and soul transformation. Walker decided to speak from her mind in her fiction and poetry she speaks by creating characters who are incorrect enough to refuse to be measured by others standards. In her essays she comments on everything from communism to hairstyles, always including her opinions of the standards by which women in general and women artists, in particular, are measured. Her autobiographical essays trace her own developing insights into the social and political forces that have threatened her art, and that of generations of women artists, indeed they reveal the surprising extent to which walker's survival as an artist has been bound up with physical survival.

Walker grounds her fiction and poetry primarily in the experiences of South and Southern blacks. Her dominant themes spiritual survival and individual identity, as well as freedom, power and community, link her to the literary heritage of both southern and black writers, her structures and forms address most clearly the uniqueness of her particular vision within this tradition. Walker's heritage and history provide a vehicle for understanding the modern world in which her character lives. Walker relies upon sexual violence and physical abuse to portray breaches in black generations. She brings her work a terrible observance of black self-hatred and destruction. Her racial memory of tangible, harsh reality succeeds in focusing experience, holding it fixed and illuminating some aspects of brutality that might well be overlooked or obscured. Her fiction expresses the outrage that she feels about the injustices of society. Walker has discussed her writing and needs to write in terms that articulate her deflection of rage and her reconciliation with it. She assumes that by revealing negative actions and violent encounters, she may be able to repair the damage done by unreflective people who are

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unable to recognize that their actions have more than personal consequences, that they may rend bonds between generations and thus affect all members of the family community, race or society. Redemption may be undertaken by a single individual in whom rests the responsibility for survival because it is the action of a single individual that has caused the breakdown of experience or identity in private lives and ultimately in the public or social life of the group. Walker believes that as a writer she must work towards a large perspective. She can capture the deep layers of affirmative and destructive feelings in human beings who must live and make their lives known.

Feminism is a School of thought stating that sexism, class oppression, gender identity and racism are bound together. From the 1970s to 1980s, a black feminist formed various groups which addressed the role of the black women in black nationalism. It insists upon the rights of a woman to absolute authority over her own body including whether to bear children or not. Feminism states that women are an oppressed and exploited class bound into their role by the exigencies of their biology and rendered impotent politically and socially. It asserts that the basic humanness and selfhood of women are not objects but persons. Feminism also states that the rights of a woman to know herself not as a shadow of man but as an autonomous and authentic individual. The term African American has come to be preferred to Black Feminist. Even the term feminist has been rejected by a black female writer, in preference to womanist, for example, by Alice Walker, one of the most successful black female authors and critics. She remarks that a womanist does not run back on the men of her community. She identifies black female creations in earlier generations through folk art including music and gardening. Zora Neale Hurston, Harlem Renaissance writer and florist, laid emphasis on the connection between the telling of folktales and the creation of the body of black literature.

Some black feminist supporters argue that black women are positioned within structures of power in fundamentally different ways from white women. Moreover, black women had meagre sources of income and free time to try other things, and fight against their multi-pronged oppression. Michael Awkward distinguishes between the Wars black female writers influence each other and the ways male writers do. Maya Angelou an excellent example of a black feminist writer, in her four couples autobiography, connects her personal nightmares with larger social issues. Her message becomes a celebration of black people and of black women in particular. Black women are considered as the subject of oppression they are valued less and considered as an object of sex. They were even oppressed by their own community. The Civil Right Movement played a vital role in finding the identity of the black woman. The Civil Rights Movement, admire the wherewithal associated with it, amidst racism, sexism classism and utmost poverty. Most of the African American women became an activist in the movement. They received no recognition for involving themselves in the movement. Though slavery was abolished, blacks in America could not get their rights, at least on paper until the Civil Rights Movement happened.

The African American literary tradition implies the fact that African- American culture is the culture of suppressed

people. The history of African American people is recognizable with slavery, which starts from the year 1619 till 1865. The history is characterized by continuous suppression, dehumanization, humiliation, racial segregation and exploitation. African-American were viewed as people with no heritage, no history, no cultural heritage, no tradition and no identity in white American. From early centuries Europeans and Americans advanced in racial theories of inferiority, theories of black feminism and psychoanalytical theory which attributes African – Americans as lower caste and ignored their ownership of cultural, ethnic and linguistic values. In the inspiring quotes of Martin Luther King, states that 'I refuse to accept the view that mankind is so tragically bound to the starless midnight of racism and war that the bright daybreak of peace and brotherhood can never become a reality... I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word'.

In his view, man cannot accept the tragic bound of racial discrimination at the midnight or daybreak. During 1865, slavery was destroyed in America and the country was governed by white politicians. This slavery leads to the slave trade, which was related to racial prejudices and racial segregation. The black people were oppressed by the white politicians. Racial inequality was compartmentalized in which imposed on all aspects of Black Americans' lives- art, music, literature, education and technology. The Great Migration, spanning the early to mid-1900s, was a massive but gradual movement of African American from the South to the North and Midwest, from rural areas to urban areas in search of better lives and more opportunities. It is one of the central, definitive elements of African –American history and culture, its impact on jazz, blues, literature and popular culture continues to be felt today. The Great Migration changed the social economic and political makeup of the United States as an African American population concentrated into southern and northern urban centres. It transformed demographics not only bringing blacks out of the south but also redistributing them, mostly to urban centres, within the South itself. The ramifications were major. This migration also influenced various aspects of popular culture, including jazz and blues, which suddenly enjoyed new audiences, as well as new inspirations.

The migration of African American to the North stemmed from a variety of factors but was mostly based on jobs and the economy. Many African American had worked in agriculture, earning very little for their labour and often being exploited in sharecropping systems. Blacks working in other types of jobs also found themselves underpaid and unable to move up the ranks. Pest invasions decimated crops; migrant work was unstable and low paid. For women, the attraction for social mobility was especially great, as they often worked in menial domestic jobs, being exploited economically or sexually. In the North and West and in cities in general, commerce was dynamic and offered higher pay and more opportunities.



Additionally, business in the North put measures in place to attempt to attract African –American employees to move up. Meanwhile, southern area put politics in place to try to counteract the trend. Many southern blacks were against migration, as it would tear apart communities and economies.

According to Joe William Trotter's *The African American Experience*, "conditions in southern agriculture and the lure of higher wages in northern industries stood at the forefront of these forces". World war I created jobs in the North, so people moved in search of these jobs. Trotter claims that as a result "of world war I, an estimated 700,00 to 1 million blacks left south for northern and western cities". Sometimes men would relocate first, the rest of the family following when stability was achieved; however, women shared decision making and sometimes determine the destination, as both men and women were eager to change their conditions. Migrants were often innovative and enterprising, generating a sense of community and commonality. People would pool their resources to purchase tickets at discounted prices, thus creating migration clubs. A newspaper called *Chicago Defender* was an instrumental force in recruiting blacks to the North, specifically to Chicago, with promises of social and economic opportunity.

II. HISTORY OF BLACK WOMEN AND LITERATURE

Tradition is a word that has to 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 what we call tradition. The heroic voice and heroic image of the black woman get suppressed in a culture that depends on her heroism for this survival. People have to recognize is that the creation of the fiction of tradition is a matter of power, not justice, and that power has always been in the hands of men mostly white but some black. Women are the disinherited. Those differences and the assumption that those differences make women inherently inferior. In the early 1890s, a number of leading black intellectuals decided to form an organization of Colored authors, scholars, and artists, with the expressed intent of raising the standard of intellectual endeavour among American Negroes. Black women intellectuals and activists, who in the 1890s had taken on such issues as the moral integrity of black women, lurching and the education of black youth being considered social decorations.

This egregious example of sexism in the black intellectual community is still far more egalitarian than their white counterparts because it underscores an attitude towards black women that has helped to maintain and perpetuate a male-dominated literary and critical tradition. Women have worked assiduously in this tradition as writers, as editors, sometimes, though rarely, as critics, and yet every study of African American narrative of the African American literary tradition has set forth a model of literary paternity in which each male author vies with his predecessor for greater authenticity, greater control over his voice thus fulfilling the mission of forefathers left unfinished. Women's writing is considered singular and anomalous, not universal and representative, and for some mysterious reason, writing

about black women are not considered as racially significant as writing about black men.

Zora Neal Hurston was chastised by critic Benjamin Brawley because 'Her interest.... is not in solving problems, the chief concern being with individuals'. Without exception, African American women writers have been dismissed by African American literary critics until they were rediscovered and reevaluated by feminist critics. Expect for Barbara Christian's *Black Women Novelists* and other texts that specifically deal with women writers, critical texts have never considered early black literary traditions. There is a single distinguishing feature of the literature of black women for their lack of recognition and it is their literature is about black women takes the trouble to record the thoughts, words feelings and deeds of black women. There are no women in this tradition hibernating in dark holes contemplating their invisibility, women in the literature of black women succeed in heroic quests without the support of other women or men in their communities. Women talk to other women in this tradition and their friendships with other women in mother, sisters, grandmothers, friends are vital to their growth and well-being.

Women Literature has been in terms and its rejection by women writers today is a reaction against automatic disparagement of their work. Any literature has its own base, women literature derive from an area of experience worthy of exploration, which is known pretty exclusively to women and largely overlooked by men or in terms of alien standards. For a woman to look at her life, she must be powerlessness, she must choose decisively to confront what has been happening to her as a passive creature and try actively to understand what it means and has meant. She must choose to give up known means of control and the accepted logic of causality in search of the inner reality of her experience. If this is a choice of madness it is a special kind of choice. The stories from the traditional matter of women literature in the betrayed heroines abound. Southern women writers present characters which dissociates them from contemporary values and norms of behaviour.

The year 1963 marked the hundredth anniversary of the emancipation and it was a year made notable by many vast demonstrations mounted by Negro groups in the stress of cities in the North as well as in the South as they pressed forward their demands for the desegregation of public facilities and for the extension of fair employment opportunities. President Kennedy's proposal of a new Civil Rights Act this flurry of activity was brought to a kind of climax on the twenty-eighth of August by the March on Washington for jobs and freedom, when more than two hundred thousand people, black and white from all over the land gathered on the mall extending from the Washington Monument to be Lincoln Memorial, largest outdoor mass meeting in the history of the nation's capital. The African American life implied in this dismissal of psychological, theological and existential questions is shuddering to contemplate.



It reduces the racial role of mere victim of white brutality. The presence of black in American writing can scant altogether one of the most remarkable strains in the work namely the testimony lately brought forward by the literature of Black Autobiography.

III. DISCUSSION RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Alice Walker is the first African American women writer who takes the issue of female genital mutilation as a theme for her novel. Her story *Possessing the Secret of Joy* traces the sufferings of individual and cultural motivations for female circumcision in Africa. The author came to know about this cultural practice has been forced on African women society. Has she heard about this procedure of female genital mutilation, she astonished and this made a strong impact in her heart to write about this in her novel. *Possessing the Secret of Joy* is the fifth novel of Alice Walker in which she tells about the female circumcision. African Women who undergo this circumcision suffers psychologically. The trauma they face throughout life affects their inner and self-potential. Some personal motives make her choose this as a theme for her novels. Alice Walker, herself had been undergone psychological trauma when her brother accidentally hit her right eye from a BB gun shot. Her partial blindness caused her to withdraw and begin writing poetry to ease her loneliness. She found that writing demanded a peaceful atmosphere, but there were difficult commodities to come by when ten people lived in four rooms, so she spends a great deal of time working outdoors sitting under a tree. Years later, in her documentary text *Warrior Marks*, Walker revisits this instance of her physical blinding and tells us that this past experience led to a social awakening and encouraged her to investigate the secrets of women's (sexual) blinding worldwide. This incident inspires her to take this female mutilation as the theme for her novel and which focus on the protagonist's psychological trauma after circumcision. In *Warrior Marks* she says:

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 bond, as their wound heals. It is taboo to speak of what has been done to them....(18)

Tashi, the protagonist of the novel *Possessing the Secret of Joy* undergoes female circumcision by M'lissa, the traditional circumciser. This not only affects her physically but also psychologically. Tashi is introduced to the reader as a child, fortunately, she escaped from circumcision in her childhood. Walker shows Tashi as an Olympian tribe girl, as she belongs to the African culture, she loves to follow the customs of her home country and gives herself to the African traditional practice. Though she been married to an American man named Adam, her wish is to follow the native tradition that makes her go back to her own tradition.

Unfortunately, this decision put her into psychological trauma. Without knowing the problems and sufferings of the tradition Tashi voluntarily gives herself to the traditional practice. As per the Olinka culture, every woman should be circumcised, without knowing the pain and suffering Tashi feels that she is incomplete from her tradition because she is not circumcised. In Olinka tribe culture there is a saying that if women from the community don't get circumcised are considered to be unclean and unfulfilled as a woman.

Tashi is introduced as a child, crying uncomprehendingly over the death of her sister Dura.

When she later decides to be circumcised herself as an act of her tribal culture, she does so as in defiance of colonial rule and missionary teaching, but also she has forgotten or rather repressed that she had witnessed as a very young child her sister's death in consequence of the same initiation rite.

The novel tries to preserve a delicate balance between representing the sexually mutilated women as a victim on one hand and as a survivor who decides to act in her own cause on the other. Olivia, Tashi's childhood friend who advised her not to undergo this ritual but Tashi replied to her that by undergoing this ceremony she is considered to be an African woman.

The woman named Melissa, a traditional circumciser start to do the ritual practice. After circumcision, Tashi faced many problems she can't move as casual as before and also she struggles to sit on the floor. She has been harmed physically, she seems to be dull and unhappy. Tashi thought that she will become a complete woman after undergoing this ritual but it turned negative after circumcision she lost her peace and happiness.

She is not been harmed physically but also psychologically. It even affects her marriage life, she failed to have a good relationship with her husband.

This infibulation makes Tashi physically and mentally weak. It also affects her on giving birth, the baby head was too big to come out from infibulated, because of this the baby brain is crushed during the pregnancy due to this the baby seems to be pale yellow. After this incident, she has been affected psychologically.

Every night at sleep she had a horrible dream which leads her to mental trauma. Tashi was taken to a psychiatrist to recover.

Balance is achieved at the level of the plot through Tashi's psychotherapeutic experience which traces her transformation from madwoman to warrior. She visits the psychoanalyst Carl Jung to begin to remember her African childhood and access the trauma from which her cure will evolve.

Jung's approach enables Tashi to confront the memory of what it was like to be whole and willing to experience sexual pleasure.

Tashi slowly recovers herself by dreamwork and painting. Tashi remarks it as:

I painted I remembered, as if a lid lifted off my brain, the day I crept, hidden in the elephant grass, to the isolated hut from which came howls of pain and terror. Underneath a tree, on the bare ground outside the hut, lay a dozen rows of little girls, though to me they seemed not so little. They were all a few years older than me. Dura, however, was not among them; and I knew instinctively that it was Dura being held down and tortured inside the hut. Dura who mad those inhuman shrieks that rent the air and chilled my heart. Abruptly, inside, there was silence. (70)

Tashi comes to think of herself as a black woman who is incomplete and whose life has been ruined rather than as a complete woman. Tashi is represented as having been in possession of the secret of joy before she lost it. Tashi's healing process is only properly completed when other women take up the cause of protest and it is a completion that paradoxically is achieved at the price of her death. The African tradition is not in this case of medium for the passing on a valuable cultural heritage but the ideological instrument of torture. Walker here breaks with two tenets of Afrocentric feminist thought at one stroke; first the oral tradition is a source of alternative knowledge and second, mothers always have their daughters best interests at heart. Through this novel, Walker strongly registers that there is a need to struggle against the oppression. Tashi who decide to sacrifice herself get mental trauma and decides to take revenge on the oppressed society. When she returned to her consciousness she starts remembering her childhood with her sister Dura. The death of her sister Dura and the trauma she undergoes made her take revenge on the lady who does the ritual practice to her. She plans to kill M'lissa the woman who was very cruel to do female circumcision to all the young ladies of Olinka tribe. As she planned she kills M'lissa and saved millions of future African women. She has been executed for this cause. Though she executed, Tashi wins millions of heart. At the time of executed all her relatives utter the slogan 'Resistance is the Secret of Joy'.

IV. CONCLUSION

Alice Walker is considered to be one of the most controversial African American female writers, thoroughly analysed by literary critics all over the world. She is always viewed as an artist who brings out the true picture of past history. Throughout her literary career, Walker has written a great number of poems, short stories and novels in all of which she pays particular attention to the life stories of one of the most marginalized and neglected social groups, that is African American women. Since Walker comes from the same community may be she has brought in so many personal ideas into the novel. Sexism and Racism are the major subjects that ran through all of Walker's novels. She mainly concentrated on the relationship between man and women in the black community than the contrast between the black and white race. Walker's novels bring back the general issues of the black's to generate new life in the society. Her novels helped to revive the cultural heritage and the historical background of the blacks. She is the first African American women writer to talk about the female genital mutilation in her novel *Possessing the Secret of Joy*.

According to Walker cultural relativism is a kind of torture it is no culture. Through the character of Tashi, Walker put forth problem and trauma faced by African women in the practice of culture. By depicting the trauma, suffering and pain through the character, she creates some awareness among the readers. As Jung suggestion 'culture lies outside the purpose of nature', Walker brings the sufferings faced by the women in the name of cultural ritual.

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