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SEXUAL POLITICS AND GENDER IMPERIALISM IN ALICE WALKER'S
POSSESSING THE SECRET OF JOY

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ABSTRACT

In this novel, Alice Walker strikes with the graceful power at the heart of the most controversial issues of the time. In it, she very powerfully describes the circumscriptive, oppressive and degrading roles of the society which denies a black woman to think, decide and live freely and fearlessly. The rituals and traditions like circumcision, the celebration of womanhood and scarification which are very frequently celebrated in some the black communities, demand complete denial of self from a black woman. Walker very critically examines and interrogates the African tradition of female genital mutilation in this novel.

Alice Walker in this novel shows how the young African tribal girls like Dura and Tashi have to suffer the consequences of female circumcision throughout their life. Walker 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 customs and traditions which society imposes on a female in order to make man powerful and keep full control over female but after her awakening about the traditions of the society specially on its female members, challenges them and comes to the conclusion that "RESISTANCE IS THE SECRET OF JOY". The novel catalogues her descent into madness, her long fight to salvage and reconstruct a self, her return to Africa, her final costly liberation and her discovery that "resistance is the secret of joy"

Keywords: Gender oppression, mutilation, circumcision, resistance, liberation, customs and culture

In her novel *Possessing the Secret of Joy* Alice Walker strikes with the graceful power at the heart of the most controversial issues of the time. In it she very powerfully describes the circumscriptive,

oppressive and degrading roles of the society which denies a black woman to think, decide and live freely and fearlessly. The rituals and tradition like circumcision, the celebration of womanhood and scarification which are very frequently celebrated in some of the black communities, demand complete denial of self from a black woman. Walker very critically examines and interrogates the African tradition of female genital mutilation in this novel. These are the traditions which are frequently practiced even now-a-days. Alice walker says:

“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.” (*Possessing the Secret of Joy* : 281 subsequently cited as PSJ).

Alice Walker suggests “the connection between mutilation and enslavement that is at the root of the domination of women in the world”(PSJ.137). She describes that there are three forms of female circumcision.

- a) Sunna Circumcision – It refers to the removal of the prepuce or vaginal foreskin.
- b) Clitoridectomy – It refers to the detachment of the clitoris.
- c) Infibulation – It refers to an excision of both sides of vulva which is then scraped raw and sewn together, often in less-than-sanitary conditions. Infibulation leaves only a small opening for the vagina, which can give heightened sexual pleasure to a men during intercourse, but makes urination, menstruation, intercourse, and especially the birth process not only painful but also life-threatening.

Alice walker in this novel shows how the young African tribal girls like Dura and Tashi have to suffer the consequences of female circumcision throughout their life. An 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 bleed the innocent little black girls to death, is considered as a sacred act and it is celebrated by women preparing special food for the occasion. Houses are especially cleaned and washed and the bodies of the circumcised are oiled and bathed. The innocent girls are led towards their deaths by giving them attractive things. Dura “had been very excited during the period leading upto her death. Suddenly she had become the centre of everyone’s attention; everyday there were gifts. Decorative items mainly : beads, bracelets, a bundle of dried henna for reddening hair and palms, but the odd pencil and tablet as well. Bright remnants of cloth for a headscarf and dress. The promise of shoes ! ” (PSJ. 9). But the innocent girls like dura have the least idea that they will be no more to use these things. Through the incident of Dura, walker shows us the horrible, hair raising process and the consequence of female circumcision. Tashi remembers the moment when Dura was taken to an isolated hut in order to perform the operation on her body. Tashi was hidden in the elephant grass, She stealthily watched and found underneath the tree, sitting on the bare ground outside the hut, “a dazed row of little girls” but dura was not among them. Tashi knew that ‘Dura was being held down and tortured inside the hut’ (PSJ. 73). She was hearing the inhuman shrieks of Dura that rent the air and chilled her heart. Abruptly inside there was silence. Then M’Lissa shuffled out, dragging her lame leg, carrying something which was so insignificant and unclean that she was carrying it “not in her fingers but between her toes. A chicken – a hen, not a rock” – gobbled it down (PSJ. 73). Dura was “bled and bled and bled and then there was death. No. one was responsible. No one to balme” (PSJ 81). Tashi was so surprised at the behaviour of other ladies. They were the same

women who'd know Dura? And whom Dura had known? She'd gone to buy matches or snuff for them nearly, everyday. She'd carried their water jugs on her head.' But no one questioned about Dura's death. Everybody listened her heart-rendering shrieks but no one helped her. No one went to save her from the crude operation of Tsunga. There was just silence.

Through the incident of Dura, Walker shows how the intense pain and suffering caused by the customs and traditions of black society perceive the life of a black woman as a kind of chain of degradation, agonies and deprivations to a normal life. Walker feels that such customs and traditions of black society are anti-life and anti-human. They turn the life of a black woman into a saga of not physical but spiritual pain also. There are the practices which forbid a black woman to live a life on her own terms.

Through the life history of Tashi, Alice Walker shows how the tradition of genital mutilation of female cripples a black woman physically, emotionally and spiritually for the rest of her life. Tashi, the main protagonist of *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, caught in the clash of religions, cultures, continents, grows up hearing stories from her playmates. Olivia and Adam of a pristine America, while watching her slow-gaited mother, herself a "gelded woman", move about her stopping laborious African life. Tashi as a little girl is seen "always laughing, and making up stories, or flitting cheerfully about the place on errands for her mother" (PSJ. 14). These are the qualities of Tashi which attract Adam's heart, "I liked her mealie row fan hair style and her impish, darting ways. I liked her self-possession. And her passion for story telling" (PSJ 27). They passionately fall in love with each other and break even the strongest taboo of the society in love. "In Olinkan society the strongest taboo was against making love in the fields. So strong was this taboo that no one in living memory had broken it" (PSJ. 27). The Olinkan society believes that - "lovemaking in the fields jeopardized the crops: indeed it was declared that if there was any fornication whatsoever in the fields the crops definitely would not grow" (PSJ. 27). But Tashi does not care for all this and passionately makes love with Adam in the fields "and the fields produced their harvests as before" (PSJ. 27). "It is, in part, the missionaries' presence that suspends the ritual mutilations for a while." "The novel's ironic beginning is patently romantic. There is joy in Tashi and Adam's initial love making, in spite of there conflicting backgrounds". In spite of such a bubbling spirit to live a life on her own terms, Tashi cannot stop herself to go for scarification and female genital mutilation. Because Tashi's mother is influenced by black American missionaries, Tashi herself is not circumcised at puberty. Surreptitiously, Tashi has gone to the place of the baths in her village, has heard her sister Dura's screams, and has seen the bloody aftermath of the "operation" that Dura dies bloodily in a botched initiation in the tribal village, but she represses the memory of the experience and forgets "why the sight of her own blood terrified her" and retains only a phobia of blood. As a teenager, surrounded by the fervor of revolution in her country and struck by the loss of her people's land, livelihood, power and culture, she makes a defiant act. Spurred on by the words of the Olinka's imprisoned leader that "no Olinkan man would even think of marrying a woman who was not circumcised" (PSJ 121). "She defiantly decides to submit herself to the hands of the ancient honored '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."

Alice Walker focuses on the psychological dimensions of sexual politics of the society which can lead a woman to the point of insanity. Not only the immediate consequences of such a horrendous practice are horrible but its aftermaths are much more horrible. Tashi does not suffer only physically but Walker shows how the genital mutilation becomes a root cause of her psychological trauma and permanently damages her psychology. Because of genital mutilation, Tashi does not lose only an important part of her body but her very soul is mutilated and she suffers from a haunting feeling 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 of Tashi lose its existence and the repressed sexual desires

cause psychological sickness in her. This leads her to associate her sexual life with this pain. 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 not painful and humiliating. It has also eradicated her sense of self and her ability to feel”. Thus natural way of life for Tashi is denied by the customs of genital mutilation of society force a black woman to get her body operated and loose a valuable part of it because a man enjoys more when he struggles.

After her marriage with Adam and renamed Evelyn in America, “Tashi undergoes a fundamental personality change. It is difficult to determine which is worse – the physical or the psychological changes resulting from her excision. The Tashi/Evelyn split hints at the complexity of the problem, for she no longer knows who she is or what her liberation, if any, will be. Sexually dead, she retreats into her imagination, her fantasy world, the domain of the story teller. Unable to face the reality Tashi makes her own fantasy life. ‘My fantasy life. Without it I’m afraid to exist” (PSJ. 36). She starts wandering in her dream world. Every night she has a dream that terrifies her. 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. “I think it is a tower. It is tall, but I am inside. I don’t really ever know what it looks like from outside. It is cool at first, and as you descend lower and lower to where I’m kept, it becomes dark and cold, as well it’s dark. There is an endless repetitive sound that is like the faint scratch of a baby’s fingernails on paper. And there are millions of things moving about me in the dark. I cannot see them. And they’ve broken my wings”. (PSJ 27).

Tashi suffers physically and psychologically because of her circumcision. She has gone for circumcision because she has thought that the circumcision will join her to her sister whom she envisions as strong, invincible. Completely woman, completely African. 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”, But 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. This is an index of her moral courage that she has to resist social-trappings in order to achieve her inner fulfillment by killing Tsunga who has been responsible for the killing of many Tashis. 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. And Tashi kills M’Lissa. She is arrested and tried as a murderer of Tsunga, a national property.

During her trials, Tashi shows her anger against her accusers and speaks a lot against male chauvinistic society in which it is man who holds 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 judgment of Tashi’s execution by the firing squad. But Alice Walker shows that the 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 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, Olivia, Benny, Pierre, Raye, Mbatu 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. Thus Walker, through the action of Tashi shows a black woman’s will and determination to free herself from the constraints

imposed upon her by the customs of society. Through her action Walker enables the reader to gain insight into how black woman gradually becomes conscious of the necessity for her individuality and establishes her identity. In fact, it is Alice Walker's courage, her "wholeness" as a person that she not only writes for the rights of women but also awakens them.

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 customs and traditions which society imposes on a female in order to make male powerful and keep full control over female but after her awakening 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 return to Africa, her final costly liberation and her discovery that "resistance is the secret of joy".

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