

Women and the Issue of ‘Constructed Femininity’ in Society: A Study of Possessing the Secret of Joy

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Abstract: When compared to the history of white feminists, the concern of the feminists with the issues related to Black women is short in supply. Black women are categorized as oppressed, subjugated and victims of domestic and sexual violence, incest and identity crisis. For the Black women, gender and race, combined with classism serves as a lethal combination. Black feminism emerged because of a convincing argument: a Black woman suffers because she is a woman and that too, a Black woman. Thus, Black feminism is oppositional to both White feminism and patriarchy.

The image of Black slave woman corresponding to the image of white women has been of available plantation workers and promiscuous women. Black feminism argues that the massive Civil Rights Movement and Black Power Movement failed in addressing the issues of Black women. Advocates of Black feminism argue that freedom for Black women would mean freedom for the entire race with an end of racial and class discrimination along with sexism. One of the theories that evolved through this is Alice Walker’s womanism. It emerged after the early feminist movements that ignored the oppressions of Black women based on the grounds of racism, classism and sexism. According to Alice Walker, a womanist is a feminist of color, who is committed to the liberation of entire race, including male and female. The writings of Alice Walker always deal with issues which require immediate and urgent attention. Walker’s novel, *Possessing the Secret of Joy* explores the consequences of Tashi’s (a minor character in her earlier novel, *The Color Purple*) decision to go through the female initiation ceremony. According to Frank Hosken, a leader in the anti-circumcision social movement the condemnation of genital mutilation is based on one fact: that the goal of this practice is to mutilate the sexual pleasure and the satisfaction of woman. The whole male politics in Africa claims the same goal: the subjugation and dependence of female by any and all means. This is also one of the practices to control the reproductive potential of the woman according to the critics. This paper is an attempt to explore the issue of female genital mutilation in the novel which extends itself to other areas and aspects such as colonialism, sexuality, gender oppression, religion and anthropology. The term ‘female genital mutilation’ is used only by the feminists of color and other persons who are the advocates for the abolishment of such practices, whereas anthropologists and people doing these surgeries refer it as female circumcision.

I think of these young girls as little birds whose fragile bodies have been bashed, whose wings have been clipped before they can discover the power of their own souls and their erotic selves. They’ve been irrevocably wounded by traditions which have caused them much pain and deny them the freedom to flourish and fly.

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The latter part of the twentieth century witnesses the emergence of the major Black female writers. For the African American women writers novel became a resourceful medium to present the record of a facet of American history that remained neglected for a long time. As Raymond Williams argued, literature is a part of “a whole social process, which, as it is lived, is not only process but is an active history, made up of the realities of formation and of struggle”. In the late 1960s the Black female writers began their task of renaming and reclaiming their position in the history. These novelists have written about the idea of the emancipation of black women.

Through their writings these female writers have given voice to these women who were misinterpreted in literature and ‘silenced’ in real life. Alice Walker, a poet, essayist and novelist has written about the ways of the lives of these women, and how these Southern women instruct and inspire us. The writer is the eighth child of a sharecropping family in Eatonton, Georgia. She was born in 1944 and soon felt the destructive influence of racism which destroyed both the individual and the family. As a writer, her contribution lies in exalting the daily activities of Southern Black women. Her collection of poems *Once* comprise her poems on various themes and issues such as love, Africa, death and Civil Rights Struggle. Alice Walker’s own experiences as a woman during her pregnancy years made her realize that ‘how alone a woman is because of her body’.

Published in 1992 the novel *Possessing the Secret of Joy* is the final book in the volume that completes the trilogy of novels that began with *The Color Purple*. The main character Tashi, is a minor character in Walker’s early novel *The Color Purple*. She is a young African woman and a friend of Olivia. She decides to undergo the female initiation ceremony; a ritual which is necessary to maintain her African identity. The novel, with its socio-political issue becomes a treatise of an activist writing, and stands distinct in the canon of Walker’s writings in this unfamiliar sense. Through her novel the writer has not declared a movement toward the abolishment of this practice.

The constant efforts to diminish this practice could be outlined to the seventeenth century and, female genital mutilation became one of the important itineraries of the United Nations since 1958. FGM has its roots in many parts of African and Asian countries. The supporters of this practice ground the justification of this ritual in their religion and tradition.

FGM is a tradition that has no meaning and value and results in several medical and ethical issues, inflicting severe harm on the innocent girls who are the victims of this practice- as it is performed without their consent. The justification that lies in the social ground for this practice is- to control the sexual desires of these young girls so that they do not commit any kind of adultery. The novel by the writer is a study of the deep and dark horrors of this female initiation ceremony- the physical, emotional and mental torture suffered by the victim.

The issue of female genital mutilation caught the writer’s attention during her visit to Kenya 20 years back where she saw the plight and sufferings of the girls, and their mothers who had suffered the atrocities of the ritual. The germ of the writing of this novel lies in the cinematic adaptation of *The Color Purple* when she thought that Tashi’s painful decision, and the consequences of the decision should be given a proper analysis as the

girl who played the role of Tashi was an African girl who had herself undergone the traditional practice. The whole personality of Tashi transforms from a young and lively girl to a victimized woman who has undergone physical and mental traumas. The revelation of this tradition and its implications of the ritual were not so easy for the writer to comprise into a novel. As Alice Walker says it took her a year to write this novel and twenty years to understand how to approach this difficult issue. During her long years of research on the subject she discovered a horrifying reality that females were held responsible for their suffering. "Their gentiles are unclean, Monstrous. The activity of an unmutated female vulva frightens men and destroys crops. When erect the clitoris challenges male authority. It must be destroyed". For a writer like Walker, there is no difference between literature, social responsibility and art; which gave her the final courage to come up with such a strong issue as the subject of her novel.

Alice Walker's perception of the suffering of these young girls, who were the victims of this tradition, is also her association of their loss with her own physical loss which she suffered in her childhood. She suffered from partial blindness due to her brother's mistake, but her parents considered it as a minor accident. She felt deeply hurt, and negligent. This incident of her life perhaps provided stimulus to the writer to handle this issue and understand the pangs of pain and torture of these young women and their mothers. Being an African American feminist writer, she wrote with the purpose of giving voice to the silenced subject. Walker recorded the pain of these girls who were not allowed to speak of their loss. She associated this to her own silence as she was not allowed to speak the truth about her injury to anyone including her parents.

FGC is a practice which holds its justification in the religious grounds since age old. In Islam, circumcision is a ritual that is performed on male and female both. According to the practitioners of this ritual it is a way to dominate the women by controlling their sexual desires. This was necessary to keep them pious and virtuous so that they do not commit adultery; since, though a woman is weak, but she has always been held responsible for the success and failure of man. Though she is submissive and oppressed, but she is also an easy victim to the weaknesses of human nature.

FGM is also one way to sub serve the female identity. She is silenced by depriving her of the biologically and socially constructed identity. The origins of this ritual could be traced back to 5th and 6th century B. C. The Greek geographer Strabo reported the custom found in the twenty- fifth century B. C. when he travelled to Egypt. Strabo discovered that the custom was practiced on the women of high caste as a part of pre- marital rite. It is believed that in Ancient Egypt girls could not marry, enter mosque or inherit property if they were not circumcised. From its probable origins FGC seems to be propagated to the Red sea coastal tribes by the Arab traders from Egypt and from there to Eastern Sudan. Though in some religions it is a practice for both male and female, but the effects are more devastating on the body and psyche of females than males. It is a means to suppress the woman and reduce her sexual pleasures as compared to the male partner. The most painful and harsh form part of mutilation- infibulation is considered as a symbol of ethnicity in many countries and their cultures; for instance, in Sudan, uncircumcised women are considered slaves.

Although FGM is not a customary ritual in any religion, it has become integrated with

the traditional practices of some religions like Islam, Christianity, Jews and in African countries. FGM is not a customary ritual in any religion. Neither of the two sacred texts of Islam mentions it as a sacred and religious rite. It is a part of the custom of their religion to maintain the chastity and purity of the female by suppressing her overtly sexual impulses.

Patriarchy is an age old system of asserting the male dominance over woman. In this context FGM is a practice that assures physical control over women by men. Thus the practice becomes a source of more pleasure to man than to woman. The reduced pleasure is symbolic of the female domination that makes her fearful of any kind of physical relations with the man. The fear created makes the physical union with her husband a painful and frightful activity. Such control and dominance through infibulation makes her preserve the chastity till her marriage and even after the marriage there is no risk of the wife being involved with any second man.

Yet the question that remains unanswered is - how could the women who have themselves undergone the physical and mental pain and agony of circumcision, make their daughters also the victim of the same practice? But the answer is grounded in the fact that they want their daughters to get married and live thereafter happily, as it is the only proof of their chastity in some cultures whereas, for men it is a kind of a check on their women to keep them safe from promiscuity. A woman is thus prepared for her journey into a life of pure womanhood after circumcision. When viewed from this stance female circumcision assures a life with social and economic security to the women in the countries where it is practiced as a cultural tradition.

Alice Walker's *Possessing the Secret of Joy* is dedicated with respect to the blameless vulva. The story is set to narrate the marked and contrasting difference between the fate of the circumcised and the uncircumcised. Amongst all these the most direct and obvious is the conflicting description of a French woman's orgasmic feeling of child birth and Tashi's traumatic ones. The character of Tashi steers the novel in the new direction in exploring the nature of women's oppression in the African culture with one of its most unpalatable manifestations.

The circumcised and mutilated woman, according to Tashi is a Christly figure who sacrifices herself for the sins she has never done in her life, 'not in some age no one even remembers, but right now daily in some lands, on earth' (p. 259). The aim behind Tashi's compliance is also to break the taboo surrounding the custom of genital mutilation, which also provided the key factor in instigating the writer to write the novel. In the novel Tashi has not only lost her genitals; but like every woman who has been circumcised she has lost her femininity. Circumcision as a practice is a painful activity for both male and female, is a process of bodily intervention disrupting their divided socially attributed gender roles. This is well explained in the novel through the character of Harvard educated Frenchman-Pierre. Circumcision becomes a way to write the instance of femininity over the body. For Tashi the excised vulva is her 'missing content' of her female body. The earlier idea of 'constructed' femininity changes into the 'essential' femininity. What has been snatched away from her in the veil of cultural practice and tradition can never be recovered and thus the text becomes an attempt on the part of the writer to explore the complex issues associated with circumcision.

Tashi's decision to get circumcised is her anti-colonial gesture. In one of the letters written by Nettie to Celie in the novel *The Color Purple*, Walker mentions how the Olinkans view it as an anti-colonial gesture.

It is a way the Olinkans can show they still possess their own ways, said Olivia, even though the White men have taken everything else. Tashi didn't want to do it, but to make people feel better, she has resigned. She's going to have the female initiation ceremony too, she said (p.245).

It is referred 'not as a wound but as a healing' (p.60). But as the story forwards and she transforms as a character she sees it with a new lens as a manifestation of the patriarchal oppression. The act of circumcision is not done by men but by woman, makes the text important in serving its aim of resistance. The circumciser M' Lissa is the murderer of Tashi's sister Dura. Earlier she is the opponent of Tashi but then the shift of the whole novel changes when the circumciser and the circumcised both share the same stance of the victims of the ritual. The narrative reveals the self-sustaining abuse of the two characters who are entrapped in the brutality of the custom. She fulfills the tradition of tsunga in which the circumciser is burned to death by the circumcised. The shift in her gaze from the colonial analysis becomes evident at the time of her trial in Olinka 'White is not the culprit this time' (p. 100). Tashi is confronted in the end by the truth that resistance is the secret of joy along with her realization of the fact that she has lived like an oppressed throughout her life.

Alice Walker's writings are not concerned with the conventional themes of Black writings. She has written about subjects which are like blocks in the way of the emancipation of the Black women. The influence of Zora Neal Hurston is clearly seen in her choice of subjects which operate outside the framework of conventionality. Their clear aim is to cross the political and cultural borders and to make the reader understand that white or black men are not the only reasons of black women's oppression.

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