



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

WALKER'S *"Possessing the Secret of Joy"*

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Abstract

Alice Walker's novel "Possessing the Secret of Joy" delves into the cultural practice of female genital mutilation (FGM) and its impact on the lives of women. The novel explores the pressures that lead to the practice of FGM, including the role of tradition, family, and community. One of the major themes of the novel is the concept of tribal frenzy, which refers to the way in which members of a community can become caught up in a collective emotion or hysteria, leading them to act in ways that they might not otherwise. The main character, Tashi, undergoes FGM as a young girl and struggles with the physical, psychological, and emotional consequences of the practice. Through Tashi's story, the novel raises important questions about the relationship between tradition and individual freedom, and about the complex and often contradictory nature of cultural practices. The concept of tribal frenzy is used to highlight the power dynamics within communities and the ways in which cultural practices can be used to control individuals. Overall, "Possessing the Secret of Joy" is a powerful exploration of the impact of FGM on women's lives and the complex dynamics of culture and tradition.

Key Words: FGM, contradictory, exploration, tradition, community, tribal frenzy

Introduction

Alice Walker's novel "Possessing the Secret of Joy" deals with the issue of female genital mutilation (FGM), a practice that is common in many African countries and some other parts of the world. The novel explores the physical, psychological, and emotional consequences of this practice on women. One of the themes that runs throughout the novel is the concept of "tribal frenzy." Tribal frenzy refers to the way in which members of a community can become caught up in a collective emotion or hysteria, leading them to act in ways that they might not otherwise. In the context of the novel, tribal frenzy is often associated with the practice of FGM. The main character, Tashi, is subjected to FGM as a young girl, and the novel portrays the cultural and social pressures that lead to this practice. Tashi's mother, for example, believes that FGM is necessary in order to prepare her daughter for marriage and to ensure her acceptance within the community. Tashi's father, meanwhile, feels that he must comply with the wishes of his tribe, even though he himself is opposed to the practice. As Tashi grows older, she begins to question the wisdom of FGM and to feel anger and resentment toward her family and her culture. However, she also comes to understand the power of tribal frenzy and the way in which it can be used to control people. She sees how the elders of her tribe use the threat of ostracism to keep people in line, and how the community can turn on an individual who does not conform to its expectations.

Ultimately, Tashi decides to undergo a more extreme form of FGM, known as infibulation, in order to demonstrate her loyalty to her tribe and to protect her younger sister from the same fate. However, the procedure leaves her physically and emotionally scarred, and she is unable to find peace or acceptance within her community. Through the concept of tribal frenzy, Alice Walker highlights the complex and often contradictory nature of cultural traditions, and the difficult choices that individuals must make in order to navigate them. The novel raises important questions about the relationship between tradition and individual freedom, and about the role of cultural practices in shaping our identities and our sense of self.

African women are silenced and sworn to secrecy about the magnitude of damage inflicted on them. Though Walker provoked severe criticism for her protest against female circumcision, but no oppression could dwindle her from denouncing ghastly ritual of clitoridectomy as a strategy of male domination. In 1946 British Colonial Government prohibited infibulations and passed a law in Sudan to forbid the deadly practice. But apprehending colonial intrusion, the whole population of Sudan immediately infibulated all its daughters though still in infancy, and resulted in many deaths. The ignorant people resented as such interference may be another form of imperialism. Even renowned doctor apprehended that "that kind of help which they think of as solidarity, is another type of colonialism in Israel. So we must deal with female circumcision ourselves. It is our

culture, we understand it, when to fight against it and how, because this is the process of liberation” (204). Tashi in *Possessing The Secret of Joy* looks passionately aggressive to defend tribal honour. She feels that the presence of colonists and white missionaries is a threat to Olinkan tradition, and to save cultural prestige she heroically submits herself to the knife of M'Lissa.

However the issue of circumcision has captured global concerns as it may cause hysteria, haemorrhage, chronic pelvic infection, dysmenorrhoea, infertility, difficulty in child birth and even death. The gynaecologist feels that “the pharaonic could hide a lot of diseases-perhaps tumours, anything. These women could not be properly diagnosed because it was impossible to introduce instruments to examine them. So they remained untreated or had to submit to operations simply to permit diagnosis”(Lightfoot 12). Female genital cutting may also cause spread of AIDS and severe health hazards. Recent psychological research has revealed that any damage to circumcision to female body that is basically more fragile tends to divert the victim from normalcy and causes uncontrollable disorder and emotional instability. Tashi looks hysterical and suffers psychological clitridectomy after going through operation. In defiance of her white missionary friends, Tashi eagerly looks to submit herself to the sinful ritual of circumcision as this is “the only remaining definitive stamp of Olinka tradition” (23). White men’s gospel or God can not be deemed righteous or satisfying. Tashi reflect cultural bonding and even goes for carving sacrificial tribal marks on her face that would make her identifiable forever as member of Olinkans. But she never knew that marks on her face would set her apart from the Western community. Walker takes the readers into taboo territory and suggests that such taboos must be broken. Tashi’s sister Dura died of bleeding during genital cutting and the sight of blood leads Tashi to a traumatic state of panic.

Tashi committed herself to circumcision as tribal frenzy excited her to stand for Olinkan honour like a strong and completely courageous women. But immediately after circumcision she deeply regrets the blunder she has made. Her proud walk shuffled and she is stunned to realize, “how had I entrusted my body to this mad woman” (151). Infibulations has irreparably damaged her physical and mental health and as Olivia stated, “her soul had been dealt a mortal blow”, and it was “plain to anyone who dared looked into her eyes”(66). Tashi’s horrible ordeal at the time of the birth of her baby Benny is all the more awful and extremely complex as the obstetrician broke also instruments trying to make the baby to come out safe. She used scalpet, a pair of scissors and severed cartilage from home. Tashi is shocked to see the baby. “Her head of yellow blue and badly misshapen.” I had no idea how to shape it properly, but hope that once the doctor left instinct would teach me” (57). And later on instinctively Tashi used her tongue to shape the baby’s head properly. Her state of mind is acutely disturbed and she dreams of herself trapped in a gigantic tower with broken wings. Her confinement in the tower symbolises patriarchal enslavement and cultural constraints which put her in a state of mental trauma. “They have broken my wings!! I see them lying crossed in a corner like discarded oars. Oh’ and they are forcing something in one end of me, and from other they are busy pulling something out”(27)

Walker has been criticized for applying cultural imperialism as she deals with the issue more as an American than African. Through Tashi, the novelist seems to protest against the version in the epigraph that black people possess the secret of joy. Tashi is determined to counter blast the system and kill T’Sunga, M'Lissa who killed her many years back. She proudly explains, “I placed a pillow over her face and lay across it for an hour. Her sad stories about her life caused me to loose my taste for slashing her” (276). The epigraph in the form of a ‘Bumper sticker’ in the opening of the novel symbolises black people’s passive submission to the evil dictate of patriarchy. The epigraph reads, “when the axe came into the forest, the trees said the handle is one of us” (i/ii). The blade of the axe and the forest indicate patriarchal dominance that cuts the wings of its own daughters and any violations to its command may lead to drastic ruin. Walker dedicated a part of royalty of her books to educate men and women to the hazardous consequences of genital mutilation that cripples the growth not only of the victimised individual but the whole society where it is practiced. Walker as a womanist and social activist has succeeded in drawing attention towards the forbidden territories of patriarchal culture. As a responsible black artist, Walker seems to have revolutionised the society to end circumcision of women and succeeded to save lives of millions of girls who have no choice in their life but to surrender to the knife of M'Lissa.

Conclusion

Alice Walker’s novel "*Possessing the Secret of Joy*" offers a powerful exploration of the cultural practice of female genital mutilation (FGM) and its impact on women’s lives. The novel tells the story of Tashi, a woman who undergoes FGM as a young girl and struggles with the physical, emotional, and psychological consequences of the practice. Through Tashi’s story, the novel raises important questions about the relationship between tradition and individual freedom and offers a powerful critique of the practice of FGM. One of the central themes of the novel is the concept of tribal frenzy, which highlights the power dynamics within communities and the ways in which cultural practices can be used to control individuals. The novel portrays the cultural and social pressures that lead to the practice of FGM and shows how individuals can be caught up in collective emotions or hysteria that lead them to act against their own best interests. Overall, "*Possessing the Secret of Joy*" is a compelling and thought-provoking examination of the impact of FGM on women’s lives and the complex dynamics of culture and tradition. It raises important questions about the relationship between tradition and individual freedom and highlights the need for individuals to challenge cultural practices that harm them. By shedding light on the damaging impact of FGM, the novel encourages readers to confront the harmful practices that continue to affect women and girls around the world.

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