

From Tradition to Cultural Violence and Trauma: Rethinking African Practices in Alice Walker's *Possessing The Secret Of Joy*

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Abstract

The renowned African-American writer Alice Walker's final novel of African trilogy, *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992) criticizes the oppressive cultural rituals and traditions that affect women's body, psychology and individuality. In this novel Walker closely analyses the practice of Female Genital Mutilation through the character of Tashi, an African woman of Olinka community. She examines this practice as a cultural violence. This novel does not only provide a binary opposition between indigenous African practices and Western modernity. It questions the systems through which authoritarian cultural practices and gendered violence are legitimized across the generations. Tashi falls into the trap of patriarchal control and undergoes physical suffering, psychological trauma, sexual difficulty and emotional breakdown. Through the theoretical perspective of Johan Galtung's concept of cultural violence, trauma theory and Walker's concept of Womanism, this article seeks to argue and reinterpret Female Genital Mutilation through the lens of cultural authenticity, ethics and individual dignity.

Keywords : Female Genital Mutilation, Body, Cultural Violence, Trauma, Gender, Womanism.

Introduction

Tradition and culture play a key role to shape the identity of an individual as well as collective memory and social existence. In African social belief systems there were many indigenous customs and practices that serve as symbols of communal unity, spirituality and cultural progress. However, some practices that were once thought to be parts of cultural practices, have been criticized for causing gender inequality, physical violence and trauma. Recent scholarships on postcolonialism and feminism argue that culture is a dynamic system that should be critically addressed and rethought in the lens of humanity, gender equality and individual justice. In this case, a distinction should be made between traditions upholding cultural values and perpetrating violence. Set in Africa, Alice Walker's *Possessing the Secret of Joy*(1992) is one of the most remarkable literary representation of this issue.

The novel deals with the polemical custom of Female Genital Mutilation through the character of Tashi, a minor African character from Walker's famous novel *The Color Purple*(1982). This process of voluntary conformity results in her lifetime physical agony, emotional breakdown and trauma. Through a note to the reader, Walker conveys the message of her novel as: "ninety to one hundred million women and girls living today in African, Far Eastern and Middle Eastern countries have been genitally mutilated"(Walker 266). She also promises to donate some amount of her royalties from *Possessing the Secret of Joy* with the aim to "educate women and girls, men and boys, about the hazardous effects of genital mutilation, not simply on the health and happiness of individuals, but on the whole society in which it is practiced, and the world"(Walker 266). In this novel, Walker depicts Female Genital Mutilation as systematic and

institutionalized form of violence caused by male dominated society. The oppressive natures of these traditions are not abrupt rather they are internalized by the community throughout the generations. Alice Walker in this novel critiques the mechanism and legitimization of the oppressive cultural practice on female bodies. At the same time she exposes the conformity and silence regarding these customs and rituals.

In this novel, Walker does not reject African culture in a generalized way, rather she makes a difference between cultural practices that preserve human dignity and oppressive customs and rituals that cause perpetual pain and agony. In this novel Walker employs the setting of Olinka to explore the practice of Female Genital Mutilation in the culture of various societies. The novel presents a trajectory of Tashi's life from childhood to a grown up woman who voluntarily accepts the norm of the ritual of Female Genital Mutilation that results in bodily suffering and lifelong psychological trauma. The critique of Female Genital Mutilation becomes evident with the death of Dura, Tashi's sister. Tashi closely witnesses the results of the ritual but she is not able to do the proceedings of the event fully. The death of Dura causes to haunt her as a memory of suppressed psychological trauma. The women of that community transmit the practice across generations. In such ways, silence and tradition make a relationship which is of much significance. Tashi also finally met the woman who performed the ritual. After the trial for murdering that woman Tashi makes her statement of resistance: "White is not the culprit this time. Bring me out paper of the colors of our flag"(Walker 264).

The central conflict of the novel arises from Tashi's desire to become a complete woman of Africa and Olinka. Her character is torn between the complexities of distinct worlds: the native, indigenous world of the Olinka and the Western world that is introduced to her by the black

family of American missionary. She befriends the Americans and establishes a relationship with the son of the missionaries, Adam. With the assistance of Adam, she rebels against the taboos of Olinkan culture especially by making love in the fields. The initial desire of circumcision of Tashi shows how powerful the psychological effect of cultural ideology is. The ritual is not imposed upon her in a passive manner. She conforms herself in believing that it will make her an authentic Olinka woman. Walker here tries to convey that when violence is inseparable from one's belonging, it operates in a more effective way. In *Possessing the Secret of Joy*(1992), Walker problematizes the assumption on tradition by demonstrating Tashi's decision for circumcision. Tashi's desire emanates mainly from her fear of being alienated in her community. She lives in a society where this practice is considered to be an essential element of female identity. As she once escaped the ritual in her childhood, she suffers from guilt and cultural exclusion. Therefore, she views this practice as a wayout of recovering her lost identity that she lacks in her imagination. Initially, Tashi does not see the act of circumcision as violence because it is portrayed to her as initiation, spiritual and physical cleansing, existence and womanhood. The physical brutality of the practice is camouflaged by the cultural interpretations of the ritual. In this context, the Norwegian sociologist Johan Galtung's concept of cultural violence can be particularly applied here. Galtung presents three forms of violence: direct violence, structural violence and cultural violence. He differentiates direct violence from structural and cultural violence. Cultural violence is the aspects of culture such as: beliefs, traditions, cultural values, symbols and ideologies. These aspects are used to operate violence in a normalized and legitimized way. In the case of Tashi, the ritual of genital circumcision operates not only physically, rather it is supported by the cultural mechanism which imparts the knowledge that circumcision is essential and needful for women's respect, femininity, marriage and cultural

belonging. Walker here presents the central argument of her novel by demonstrating that cultural violence cannot be challenged unlike physical violence because it is deeply associated within the belief system of a culture.

The female body of Tashi becomes the site where cultural belonging, patriarchy and sexuality intersect. Her body ceases to become an individual property; on the other hand, it becomes a symbolic communal property. Alyson R. Buchman's significant analysis of the novel shows that African female bodies are sites of colonization and he also argues on Walker's presentation of complex power relations that those who are themselves subjugated can also partake in oppressive social mechanisms. The novel does not show oppression as something which is externally thrust upon by colonial forces. The internal systems of patriarchy cause domination inside the community. The character of M'Lissa, the woman who performs the ritualistic proceedings is important in this context. She cannot be called simply a single villain. She has been guided by her community to do so. She plays the role of an agent of that culture and her involvement indicates women's participation in the construction of patriarchal structures. The novel reinterprets the simplistic assumption by arguing that the oppressed and the subjugated can not be distinguished between male and female. Thus, through the ritualistic practice, Tashi loses the autonomy of her body.

The aftermath of cultural violence becomes more evident when Tashi suffers from psychological trauma. The moment of the ritual does not end with only the completion of physical circumcision, instead it continues to haunt Tashi's body and consciousness. Therefore, the trauma is not only physical but also psychological. Her sexuality, motherhood, memory and emotions are deeply affected by her suffering. The past often recurs to present and causes

difficulty for her to “move on” from her memory of the experience. WHO identifies the consequences of Female Genital Mutilation as causing long-term physical and psychological effects such as: acute pain, sexual and childbirth complications, and mental trauma. Through Tashi’s life, Walker represents these consequences at both individual and psychological level. In this context, trauma theory can help in explaining the ongoing effect of the event that rules the consciousness of Tashi. Famous American scholar and literary critic Cathy Caruth argues that trauma as an experience cannot be totally perceived at the time of its occurrence. Later, it returns through repetition, memory and recapitulation. In the case of Tashi, the ritual is physically over but its psychological effects remain unfinished. Tashi’s consequent psychological imbalance is not only an instance of individual madness, rather it appears as a history that has not been pointed out. In this way, Walker puts a challenge to this notion to personalize women’s plight. The distress and suffering that a woman like Tashi has to undergo are embedded into the traditional social and cultural system. Thus, the course of the novel gradually moves from the trope of “madness” to the trope of trauma.

Alice Walker’s concept on womanism serves as an important analytical basis to interpret her portrayal of African cultural practices. Womanism does not universalize the experiences of women in general, it focuses on some particular social, historical and cultural experiences of black women. It also incorporates the aspects of familial relationship, community, society and cultural identity that do not romanticize the systems that victimize women. In *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, Walker’s direction is not towards the effacement of Tashi’s African identity. She laments on Tashi’s failure to reconsider the meaning of true African identity. The ritualistic experience of Tashi states the limitations of both cultural tradition and Western modernity. The latter does not automatically help her recover from the trauma. In the United States, she

undergoes her psychological treatment but that does not heal an injury that is assimilated in the history of cultural practices. Her complete recovery needs an understanding of the various cultural forms of violence. Moreover, Tashi cannot return to the traditions of African community without questioning it. She requires to establish a new connection with her heritage that will preserve the cultural roots without causing violence. Here, Alice Walker's concept of Womanism is important. Through Womanism she is allowed to critique male dominated practices and maintain the survival and dignity of Black communities.

Nigerian thinker and sociologist Oyeronke Oyewumi in her book *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*(1997) provides a suitable corrective to the approaches that tend to universalize African gender relations. She argues that gendered relations of African societies should not be analyzed through Western aspects of gender. She emphasizes the importance for interpreting African cultural systems within their own traditional and social concepts. This gives the idea that the criticism of Female Genital Mutilation must be historically and culturally specific. This argument of Oyewumi can be applied to the novel *Possessing the Secret of Joy*(1992) where Walker questions on certain issues such as: the particular African community that is being represented, the historical forces that shape the practice, women's recognition of the practice and the existing cultural forms of resistance. Walker also questions the aspects of colonialism, religious identity, displacement and modernity that influence the practice. These discussions reject the confinement of "Africa" into one uniform cultural category. They also make clear that African Women are not only victims of oppressive cultural traditions, they are also the critics, analysts, reformers and representatives within their own societies.

Conclusion

To conclude, it can be asserted that Alice Walker's *Possessing the Secret of Joy*(1992) is a brilliant literary presentation of cultural violence in the guise of tradition and its subsequent transformation into psychological trauma. Through the experience of the protagonist Tashi, Walker reveals the authority of cultural practice that operates through repetition, values, gender ideology and desire for communal integrity. The novel invites a movement from orthodox, traditional belief system to critical cultural consciousness. This study argues that a tradition must be questioned in terms of its ethical obligations. Tashi's tragedy appears to be a metaphor that struggles to distinguish preservation of culture from preservation of lifelong oppression and agony. The survival of a genuine culture does not depend upon the bodies of women. A culture lives by its members' efforts to rethink, reinterpret, reconstruct and transform their traditions. To sum up, the shift from cultural tradition to violence and psychological trauma therefore, advocates for critical consciousness, testimony and cultural transformation.

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