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Self and Insanity in Alice Walker's Possessing the Secret of Joy

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Abstract: This research paper entitled "Self and Insanity in Alice Walker's Possessing the Secret of Joy" explores the insanity and self-elements predominant in the novel. Its main motive is to focus on the sufferings of black women and also the discrimination of blacks and whites and, also on the struggles of African Americans, particularly women and they witness against a society that is racist, sexist, and violent. In this novel, Walker's rage is the practice of female circumcision in African cultures. She very boldly talks about FGM (Female Genital Mutilation) and how it is forced on women and to accept it as their culture and how their lives are affected by this. Here in this article, I talked about the existential crisis, patriarchal society, FGM, racism, and the quest for identity. Alice Walker writes that FGM is their (African) culture and which is forced on women. She throws light upon the evil practice of genital mutilation and convincingly shows women as victims of male patriarchy in the novel.

Keywords: Africa, Patriarchal Society, Oppression, Trauma, Taboo, FGM (Female Genital Mutilation), Psychological Disorders

INTRODUCTION

Alice Walker is an African-American writer born on February 9, 1944, in Putnam County, Georgia. She is an accomplished American poet, novelist, and activist. She is the author of the novels *The Color Purple*, which won the Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award in 1983, and some of her other works are *The Temple of My Familiar* (1989), *Meridian* (1976), *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992), *By the Light of My Father's Smile* (1998), *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970), *You can't keep a Good Woman Down*, *In Love and Trouble: Stories of Black Women* and five volumes of poetry, *Once*, *Revolutionary Petunias: And Other Poems*, *Good Night Willie Lee*, *I'll See You in the Morning*, *Horses Make a Landscape Look More Beautiful*, and *Her Blue Body Everything We Know*.

Walker's first volume poem, *Once* (1968), is based on her experiences during the civil rights movement and her travels to Africa. Influenced by Japanese 'Haiku' and the philosophy of author Albert Camus, *Once* also contains meditations on love and suicide. Her second volume, *Revolutionary Petunias and Other Poems* (1973), revisits her southern past, while other verses challenge superficial political militancy. The collection won the Lillian Smith Book Award (named for Georgia writer Lillian Smith and administered by the Southern Regional Council). Alice Walker is regarded as a writer of powerfully expressive fiction. Her work consistently reflects her concern with racial and political issues, particularly with the black woman's struggle for spiritual and political survival, and some of her works also reflect stories from her own life, the autobiographical elements. Her political awareness, her Southern heritage, and her sense of the culture and history of her people form the ultimate base of her material. Much of her writing reveals her concern for black women and their families. She has received many awards for her tough portrayal of racism in her works and many other awards including The Lillian Smith Award from the National Endowment for the Arts, The Rosenthal Award from the National Institute of Arts & Letters, The Radcliffe Institute Fellowship, the Merrill Fellowship, and a Guggenheim Fellowship and The Front Page Award for Best Magazine Criticism from the Newswomen's Club of New York. Walker began publishing her fiction and poetry during the latter years of the Black Arts Movement in the 1960s along with some other writers of the black movement like Toni Morrison and Gloria Naylor and which is commonly associated with the post-1970s attack in African American women's literature and her writing also explores the multidimensional relationship among women and embraces the redemptive power of social and political revolution.

Her works deeply discuss the sufferings of black women and also the discrimination of blacks and whites. Her works focus on the struggles of African Americans, particularly women and they witness against a society that

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is racist, sexist, and violent. Her writings also focus on the role of women of color in culture and history. She is a respected figure in the liberal political community for her support of unpopular views as a matter of principles. She is sympathetic towards people of all sexualities, ethnicities, and races. Her first novel *Third Life of Grange Copeland* was first published in 1970 where she talks about three generations of a black family living in Georgia where the main protagonist Grange Copeland a black farmer leaves his family(wife and son) behind as he was disappointed with his life and when he comes back he finds his son in prison and the novels tell us how as the guardian of his granddaughter, he is looking at his third and final chance to free himself from the spiritual and social environment. In her other novel *Meridian* she talks about the black white and black-black relationship through the life of the main protagonist (*Meridian*) in the novel. *The Color Purple* was her third fiction of work for which she was praised and also received the Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award in 1983. Published in 1982 it is written in epistolary tradition. It tells the story of the main protagonist (Celie) who becomes the victim of incest and abusive marriage and how she finally creates her self-image and eventually finds love and spirituality. In her other two fiction work i.e. *Temple of My Familiar* published in 1989 and *By the Light of My Father's Smile* published in 1998 explores human characters, history, myths, and legends and talks about the fathers and daughters relationship and also explores the dangerous bonds of fidelity between sisters, lovers, and memories.

Possessing the Secret of Joy published in 1992 is a political rebuke against the social diseases of tribalism and sexism. Tashi, the wounded African heroine, learns by degrees that white is not the culprit this time and eventually discovering that African tribalism and sexism are responsible for her psychological crises. With her dilemma consisting of her renouncing the egoism, the false pride of African tribalism and her discovering a unique inner voice, Tashi creates an alter-ego in the imaginary Lara, the rejected co-wife in one of her stories. Tashi's complex about the sight of blood and her repression of conventional images and their truths are the contributing causes of her mental instability. This is the searing story of Tashi, a tribal African woman and who was first glimpsed in *The Color Purple* and where she was just the minor character and who is the main protagonist in the novel *Possessing The Secret Of Joy* and whose fateful decision to submit to the tsunga's knife and be genitally mutilated

leads her to a trauma that informs her life and fatefully alters her existence. She spends the rest of her life battling madness, trying desperately through psychotherapy- she is treated by disciples of both Freud and C.G. Jung, and even by Jung himself - to regain the ability to recognize her own reality and to feel her "self". It is only with the help of the most unlikely ally she can imagine that she begins to study the mythological 'reasons' invented by her ancient ancestors for what was done to her and to millions of other women and girls over thousands of years. As her understanding grows and so does her capacity to encounter her overwhelming grief also grows. Underneath this grief is her glowing anger. And this anger propels her to act and the action brings both feelings that are firstly the life where the ability to exist with awareness at the moment and second death where she finds that she has completely lost her fear. The novel presents the deplorable condition of women on the account of female circumcision, a custom in which a woman's vagina is operated on and tightened to make it more enjoyable for men. Walker has condemned the age-old practice of female genital mutilation in this novel. The female characters face the problem of existence where they are circumcised under the pressure of male patriarchy. The novel successfully shows the gender politics behind these filthy practices.

Possessing the secret of Joy is written in continuation of the previous book of Walker that is *The Color Purple*. This book deals with the themes of subjugation of African women, racism, male domination, and this book mainly focuses on FGM (Female Genital Mutilation). As she is a postmodernist writer so, in this novel she has used the stream of consciousness technique of writing that is at one time the reader goes in past and on the other hand comes in present and the book is divided into twenty-one parts and the story is told by different characters related with Tashi the main Protagonist i.e. Adam her husband, Olivia her husband's sister, Lisette her husband's lover, M'lissa (who is a godly figure for olinkan people), Benny(Tashi and Adam son), Perrie(Lisette and Adam son). In this novel, Walker's rage is the practice of female circumcision in African cultures. She very boldly talks about FGM and how it is forced on women and to accept it as their culture and how their lives are affected by this. We also come to know that their women are just an object used for the sexual pleasure by the male society and their (women) only purpose is to satisfy their husband and take care of the family and without this FGM process done they are not accepted in the society. Walker strips Africa

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of the romantic image bestowed upon it by black writers in the 1960s and the Harlem Renaissance artists of the 1920s.

THEORY APPLIED

In this novel possessing the Secret of Joy there are elements of self and Insanity. Self means one's identity and how one sees himself/herself in relation to another or other society or when he/she comes in contact with other cultures. Insanity means madness and in this novel, one can find madness when Tashi goes through the circumcision ceremony, and after that, she goes through many psychological disorders. Adam says: "she began to paint a chicken over and over on larger and larger paper. She grew frenzied as the size of the paper hand seemed to shrink in comparison to the monstrous bird she had in her mind (73)". Here one can see that how after that process as she was cured by Lisette's uncle at his home where she starts overdrawing the image that is in her mind this is because of psychological disorders. "I did not realize for a long time that I was dead (3)". Here Tashi talks about the story of Panda and which she compares with her life. For a long time Tashi was not aware of her 'self' she was a walking dead body after she has gone through the mutilated process. She was not aware of anything and what she is doing and as she says:

"There was once a beautiful young panther who had a co-wife and a husband. Her name was Lara and she was unhappy because her husband and her co-wife were really in love: being nice to her was merely a duty panther society has imposed on them. They had not even wanted to take her into their marriage" (3)

Tashi compares herself with that Lara and feeling herself as Lara who is now not wanted by anyone. Many have talked about self and One of the great psychoanalysis theorists- Lacan says: "the unconscious is the discourse of the other...that human passion is structured by the desire of others and that we express deep feelings through the 'relay' of others"(..). And it is when Lara (panda) realized about herself when she was sitting nearby the river and sees her reflection in the water and she finds inner happiness and which Tashi compares with herself. Lacan also says that desire is a social phenomenon and psychoanalysis is a theory of how the human subject is created through social interaction as Tashi says: "since I was not a Negro woman I hesitated before hazarding an answer. I felt negated by the realization that even my psychiatrist could not see I was African. That to him, all

black people were Negroes" (17). She lives in America where she meets her doctor and for her, she has an identity as African and not as Negro because she finds the difference in both these. Lacan also says that desire appears through a combination of language, culture, and the spaces between people as when in the novel when Tashi moves to America and before marrying she thinks of her culture and to be a proper Olinkan woman she goes through the age-old practiced circumcision because she wants to carry on her culture. "It is a way the Olinka can show they still have their own ways", said Olivia, even though the white man has taken everything else. Tashi did not want to do it, but to make her people feel better, she's resigned. She's going to have the female initiation ceremony tooshe said (The Color Purple, 1982)". Lacan says that as one comes in relation with other cultures then they start finding their identity. As Tashi says: "My fantasy life without it I'm afraid to exist. Who am I, Tashi, renamed in America 'Evelyn,' Johnson?" Here Lacan says that "a strong ego is seen as defensive deceit and expressing it during analysis is seen as resistance to change. Fear of disintegration and lack drives the person to realize themselves in another imaginary individual". He further says that "desire and connection are created through language" again Lacan explains this through Saussure's signifier and signified, which are seen "not as referring to objects but to psychic representations created by their interplay and by culture and history"(..).

Many have written different articles on this novel but this field of work is new. Where this paper will explore the elements of 'self' and 'insanity' and how African culture is spoiling the life of people. This paper will also discuss the side effect of (FGM) Female Genital Mutilation and how it affects the life of the black women through different women characters in the novel and through the story of the main Protagonist (Tashi).

Ashli Dykes in her research article "Scars of Oppression" writes about the sufferings of women.

Female circumcision, a major theme Literature Review in Alice Walker's novel Possessing the Secret of Joy is a rite of passage extending far beyond the initiation ceremony. There are three types of female genital mutilation: clitoridectomy, the partial or whole removal of the clitoris in which the bleeding is stopped with pressure or a stitch; excision, where both the clitoris and the inner lips are amputated and the bleeding is stopped with

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stitching; and infibulations, the removal of the whole clitoris and some or all of the labia minora.(2)

Here in this article she mainly focuses on the main theme of the novel i.e. Female Genital Mutilation and talks about the different types of Female Genital Mutilation processes. And she boldly talks about this in very deep how women are mutilated with sharp weapons like stones, blades, etc. at a very early age and which is very unhygienic, and sometimes excessive bleeding leads to death. Then she talks about that Tashi goes through the third process of Female Genital Mutilation and that too at a very later age when she was going to marry and it is just because of the culture that is Olinkan culture and then she suffers. Here in this article she also focuses on some other women characters that have also gone through this Female Genital Mutilation.

Vijay .D. Songire and Kamalakar B. Gaikwad assistant professors in their research article *Existential Crisis in Alice Walker's Possessing the Secret of Joy and Arun Joshi's The Foreigner* writes: "After marrying Adam Tashi goes to America. There she understands the reality behind FGM. It clearly shows that the difference in African and American culture is responsible for her mental trauma" (..).

Here in these articles, they talk about the existential crisis, male domination society, FGM, racism, and the quest for identity. They write that FGM is their (African) culture and which is forced on women. They write that Walker throws light upon the evil practice of genital mutilation and convincingly shows women as victims of male patriarchy in the respective novel and how Tashi undergoes this thinking about that this is her culture but later on she realizes the reality and dark side of it when she faces mental trauma. In this research article, they have taken two novels that are Walker's *Possessing the Secret of Joy* and Arun Joshi's novel *The Foreigner* where Joshi talks about a person named Sindi Oberoi who suffers mental trauma and also faces mental illness. In this article, both the novels are compared and contrasted through the main protagonist Tashi and Sindi Oberoi.

Vijay Digambar Songire (ass. Professor) in his research article "Humanist Agenda In Alice Walker's *Possessing The Secret of Joy* says: "The novel appeals to all to develop humanist approach towards women and not to humiliate and oppress them under the name of culture.

The novel is a cry for establishing humanitarian principles like equality and freedom" (..).

This research article mainly focuses on humanism, male chauvinism, Female genital mutilation, and exploitation of women due to the culture which is prevalent in Africa. This paper particularly studies Walker's respected novel in order to depict her humanitarian concerns and exposes the falsehood of the age-old culture in the Olinka tribe which cripples a woman's natural instinct of receiving sexual pleasure by practicing female genital mutilation. The custom which is completely barbaric and unscientific makes women's lives vulnerable. They write that Walker in this novel makes a revolutionary attempt to stand against the age-old custom of FGM in order to bring out change and to establish a new kind of society that values humanitarian principles of equality and freedom. She wants to create a society, which does not differentiate between men and women.

Dhavaleswarapu Ratna Hasanthi a research scholar in his research article "The Whirlpool of Pain in Alice Walker's *Possessing the Secret of Joy* writes: "Female circumcision as a cultural practice is considered as a passport for a girl to enter womanhood and wifehood. In cultures where it is practiced, it is considered as a mark of inviolate virginity, as the procedure is performed on girls who haven't reached puberty" (..).

He has mainly talked about the culture, gender, taboos of culture, and whirlpool of pains. This paper mainly focuses on how the whirlpool of pain created for women under patriarchy in the name of cultural loyalty to practices like female genital mutilation devours the lives of many young girls and women and stresses the definite need to put end to it and Walker through this novel has put forth hope that there are certain ways to put end to the whirlpool of pain for women by men. He says that Culture makes gender roles meet certain inescapable beliefs, assumptions, expectations, and obligations. Here in this paper he mainly focuses or concentrates on the main protagonist of the novel Tashi and showcases how she is sucked into a whirlpool of pain unwittingly, unaware of the repercussions of infibulations undergone by her. It showcases the life cycle of an infibulated woman and the various difficulties she is forced to face on being infibulated, at different stages of her life. He also says that through this novel Walker also showcases how women in a patriarchal society willingly get their daughters

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circumcised and nothing is spoken of the repercussions of the procedure or even the possible death associated with it, and the women are unaware of what is happening to them and what is going around them because they are not educated and have no rights.

Dr. Nutan Kotak in her research article “Womanism: Black Feminist Theory with a Difference” talks about various works of Walker and also about Possessing the Secret of Joy where she writes:

Walker demystifies and upholds Black woman’s body through her theory and fiction both. Possessing the Secret of Joy deals with the issues of Female Genital Mutilation being practiced in many African Tribes. It traces the psychological aspect of a woman who has undergone this horrific and extremely unhealthy procedure. Tashi is a woman who under peer pressure decides to take revenge by killing the woman who performed this operation on her and many girls like her. In this novel, Walker discusses the inhuman practice of stealing women’s sexuality in the name of tradition. The grave psychological danger that these women are exposed to as one of the consequence of the Genital mutilation is at the center of the novel.(3)

Here she talks about the theory of Walker’s ‘Womanism’ which discusses both the lived experiences of black women living in America and the need to develop such a theory. To explain this theory she has taken many works of Walker that are The Color Purple, By the Light of my Father’s smile, In search of our Mother’s Garden and Possessing the Secret of Joy and Where through the Story of Tashi she talks about her theory of Womanism.

Kumar E and Dr. R Mummachi in their research article “Racialism, Violence, And Cruelty In Alice Walker’s Works” has written about the violence on black women and racism by taking various works of Walker and were by taking the extract from ‘possessing the secret of joy’ i.e.

Another glaring example of traditional cruelty within the black community itself is the custom of female circumcision a kind of most painful memory. Walker could never get rid of. She handles this theme with its serious implications for life in Possessing the Secret of Joy (1992). The plot of this novel can be simply told as that of Tashi, a tribal African woman, who has been harmonically

circumcised. Female circumcision is the most extreme form of genital mutilation practiced in Indonesia, Malaysia, and many African countries. Tashi agrees to have this done out of a sense that it will reaffirm her connection to her own culture, which has been destroyed by colonization. (7)

He has mainly talked about Africa and the problems of black people and mainly focuses on black women’s struggles. He talks about this struggle through the works of Walker where he talks about “Possessing the Secret of Joy”. He focuses mainly on Female Genital Mutilation and it affects the health of women and how this process is done. He says that right from the days of slavery, the blacks, irrespective of sex had realized the cruel reality of racism and that Sexism is more oppressive physically and mentally was the cause of grievance to the black women who were sexually exploited by both the black and white men. From the Story of Tashi to Possessing the Secret of Joy, he put light on how women are subjugated and discriminated in society. He thus says: “Walker’s depiction of the black experience in America ranges from various kinds of evil starting from white prejudice to age-old oppression of women in human societies” (..).

OBJECTIVES

The main objective is to explore the elements of self and insanity examples from the novel Possessing the Secret of Joy and to analyze how the women struggle for their identity and how the main protagonist of the novel goes Insane and mentally ill.

- 1: Analyze how women are suppressed due to cultural practices
- 2: Analyze how one loses her Self and goes insane due to Female Genital Mutilation (main cultural practices of African society)
- 3: Study the society and culture of Africa.

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