

*A critical study on Female Genital Mutilation in Alice Walker's  
Possessing the Secret of Joy*

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**Abstract**

African American literature traces its origin to the latter half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century when the African American population was still acaged one. Slaves were viewed as subhuman and incapable of mastering “the arts and sciences”. They were transported as human cargo across the Atlantic Ocean to plantations in the West Indies. The enslaved Africans were then sold to European colonies. The servant of servants who has no history, “No value and culture”. African American writers concentrate the development of integral part of American culture and literature. This literature can be termed as documentation of the multi-faceted nature of oppression, feminism, racism and dispossession of blacks. Women of African origin in the United States were keenly aware of the impact of race, class, gender and oppression upon their lives. The history of black women in United States began with the forced migration of millions of African women from the interiors of the west coast of Africa. These African American women began their narratives in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century by writers such as Phillis Wheatley. It expands to cover writers such as Ida B. Wells, Amanda Berry, and others who took up the work for women’s rights. We plan to cover the Harlem Renaissance with writers such as Marita Bonner, Zora Neale Hurston, and others. Finally, we’ve targeted writers from the movements of the 1960s such as Maya Angelou, Sonia Sanchez, and Rosa Guy as well as recent writings by authors including Michelle Wallace and Patricia Hill Collins, covering issues such as Womanism and Black Feminism.

**Key Words:** Genital, Mutilation, African-American, Puberty, Psychological, Jungian



Among the Afro American literary tradition, Alice Walker is one of the most important, successful and culturally influential women writer and the first woman to receive the Pulitzer Prize in fiction, for her novel *The Color Purple* (1982), two collections of short stories: *In Love and Trouble: Stories of Black Women* (1973) *You Can Not Keep Good Woman Down* (1981), *The Grange Copeland*, *The Temple of My Familiar* (1989) *The Light of My Father's Smile*, *In search of Our Mother's Garden: Womanist Prose* (1983). *The Same River Twice: Honoring the Difficult* (1995), *Living by the World* 1988 reveals Walker's involvement with global issues. *The Way Forward is With a Broken Heart* (Oct.2000) is Walker's latest work. *Anything We Love Can Be Saved* (1997) is a book of essays dealing with female circumcision. Extremely prolific and versatile, her resourcefulness enables her to be a poet, novelist, short story writer, essayist, chronicler and film maker. She is also relied upon as a spokeswoman for black women, and her sharp critical sense makes her a talented critic.

The first mention of female genital mutilation in *The Color Purple* is an oblique one; Nettie writes Celie that "the one ritual they do have to celebrate womanhood is so bloody and painful, I forbid Olivia to even think about it" (Walker, *Color* 195). Later Doris Baines, a wealthy white woman missionary, remarks that the Africans are good parents except for "a bit of bloody cutting around puberty": she hopes that an African woman she has educated will educate the Africans of the need to eradicate female genital mutilation (Walker, *Color* 237). This indicates Walker's political interest in female genital mutilation's eradication as early as 1982 when *The Color Purple* was published.

Alice Walker's the most recent novel; *Possessing the Secret of Joy* carries the themes of women's autonomy, economic oppression, and the Female Genital Mutilation. This novel expands the focus on women's personal and political power and women's sexual autonomy. Walker's previous novels are drawing attention to a serious social issue, female genital mutilation. This issue widens the scope of interest from previous novels to include women's health and personal rights. This paper brings out the nature and history of female genital mutilation in order to gain a complete understanding of it. It is also investigating Tashi's experience and the consequences of female genital mutilation for her as a means of discovering the ways in which Walker's political agenda informs her writing.

Female Genital Mutilation is a cultural tradition that has existed for as long as 6000 years, dating back to the time of the ancient Egyptians; it persists today in as many as twenty-eight African nations, as well as parts of Asia, and the tradition continues in "immigrant communities in the United States, Canada, Europe, and Australia" Rowley, "*Worldwide Ban*" A2). Despite laws banning it in more "civilized"

countries, practitioners from the individual cultures themselves ensure that the practice is continued in its new country. The World Health Organization estimates that more than two million women and girls undergo the procedure each year and that 80 million African women and “85 million to 115 million women (Worldwide).

The psychological origins of female genital mutilation, their explanations are “(m)aintenance of cleanliness,” “(p)ursuance of aesthetics,” of aesthetics,” “(p)revention of still births in primigravida” (first pregnancy), “(p)romotion of social and political cohesion,” “(p)revention of promiscuity,” “(i)mprovement of female sexual performance and pleasure,” (i)ncrease of matrimonial opportunities” “(m)aintenance of good health,” “(p)reservation of virginity,” and the “(e)nhancement of fertility” (Koso-Thomas, *Circumcision* 5). The backbone of the majority of these reasons is the practice of female genital mutilation as a means of controlling female sexuality and morality. As Robin Morgan and Gloria Steinem point out: “Infibulations creates the ultimate chastity belt, one forged out of the woman’s own flesh” (Favazza, *Bodies Under Siege* 162). As Rose Oldfield Hayes points out, in Sudan, as in many African countries, “Virgins are made, not born” (“Female Genital Mutilation” 622).

In *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, Tashi, the main character of an African woman who has lived in America and faced challenges when she returns to Africa and overcoming madness, occurred in her childhood. As a young woman in Africa, she undergoes a system the female genital mutilation, an experience that cuts her off from her sexual self and threatens to destroy her mentally. Tashi’s role as victim in an andocentric society reflect the mutilation of her female society as a means of maintaining its position of power of women and how it leads to established their rights

“One of Tashi’s sisters had died. Her name was Dura, and she had bled to death” (Walker, *Possessing* 8). Dura’s death Tashi’s experience of her sister’s death traumatizes and closes her off on a psychic level. Over the course of the novel, this study learn through a number of speakers of the events leading the Tashi’s psychological breakdown and the process of healing as a result of the African tradition as it is experienced by her and imposed on her by her culture.

Dura’s death was a reason to celebrated, which forces the reader to begin by asking at the same questions that Tashi asks about the traditions of the Olinkan culture. Unfortunately, Tashi does not ask those questions as a child and it is not until she is grown that the things she has forgotten begin to creep back into her subconscious. In Jungian terms, this is significant because middle age is a period during which an individual’s outward focus turns inward in a search for meaning; “cultural, philosophical, and

spiritual values” become important and the individual attempts to “expand (her) conscious grasp of the unconscious that is master of (her) fate” (Hergenhahn, *An Introduction* 75; Roper, “Robertson” 36).

Distressed Tashi does not want to remember her sister’s death or the circumstance surrounding it. Through that Walker takes psychological plight of Tashi in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*: in which the reader is given few details about the event either, other than the fact that Dura “*Had been very excited during the period leading up to her death. Suddenly She had become the center of everyone’s attention; every day there were Gifts.*” (Walker, *Possessing* 9)

Tashi chooses to forget the mysterious event this initiation ceremony performed on all young Olinkan girls, often referred to as female circumcision, but more accurately described as female genital mutilation. Though Tashi does not undergo female genital mutilation as a child but she pays a price for being different. The other village children tease her and make her feel like an outsider: “(M)y uncircumcised vagina was thought of as a monstrosity. They laughed at me Jeered at me for having a tail. I think they meant my labia majora. After all, none of them had vaginal lips; none of them had a clitoris; they had no idea what these things looked like; to them I was bound to look odd (Walker, *Possessing* 121). As an adult, Tashi remains an outsider in Olinkan culture. Not only is she uncircumcised which makes her an unfit wife and mother to an Olinkan man, she is also the friend of an African American missionary family and the wife of a non-Olinkan, American man, Adam. When in America, she feels alienated from herself and her culture: “My body had left. My soul had not” (Walker, *Possessing* 116). When in Africa, she still feels that she is not truly Olinkan and so she accepts Our Leader’s admonishment to be responsible for the old traditions and decides to have female genital mutilation done. Raye, her psychologist, asks why Tashi would willingly give up the satisfying sex life she had with Adam and Tashi answers, “To be accepted as a real woman by the Olinka people: to stop the jeering. Otherwise I was a thing” (Walker, *Possessing* 122). Tashi wishes to change her position as an outsider, as other, to become part of the dominant culture: “completely woman. Completely African. Completely Olinka” (Walker, *Possessing* 64).

Unfortunately for Tashi, she does not realize her impotence as an agent of social and political change until after the facial scarification and female genital mutilation, acts which were to signify her support of the Mbele resistance movement and to reaffirm the importance of Olinkan traditions. Instead of being transformed into the woman warrior she had hoped to become, she finds that “her own proud walk had become a shuffle” (Walker, *Possessing* 65). Later, when angry enough to kill M’Lissa for

betraying her and performing female genital mutilation on her, she finds that her mutilated body prevents her from taking any action: “I am unable to move. I look down at my feet. Feet that hesitate before any nonflat surface” (Walker, *Possessing* 224).

In the Olinkan social structure no role for a woman to play a significant social or political role other than those of wife and mother. Tashi thinks that the women’s role in the Mbele camp is “to forage for food and to conduct raids against the plantations,” and “to recruit new warriors” (Walker, *Possessing* 64 } In the Mbeles’ effort to reconstruct “a traditional Olinkan village from which to fight,” they sent for M’Lissa, the tsunga, or circumciser, and Tashi, an uncircumcised woman on which to impose tradition (Walker, *Possessing* 244). Unwittingly, Tashi buys into the Mbeles’ need to reassert Olinkan traditions because she feels pressure to fit in.

The degree of Tashi’s psychological imbalance is evident in Tashi’s fantasy and creative life and results in her murder of her circumciser, M’Lissa. Since she was a child she likes to tell stories, but as she matures, she realized that story-telling and fantasizing are a means of avoiding and deflecting the truths she has discovered-truths which conflict with the archetypal dream of the termite hill. Even Tashi begins to tell her own story; she interrupts it with a story: “I did not realize for a long time that I was dead. And that reminds me of a story ...” (Walker *Possessing* 3). Olivia, Tashi’s lifelong friend, concurs that her storytelling is a way of evading telling or dealing with the truth: “This is the way Tashi expressed herself. The way she talked and evaded the issue, even as a child” (Walker, *Possessing* 6). Olivia and her family met Tashi on the day of Dura’s death, so there is no evidence as to whether Tashi’s evasive storytelling began prior to the point. Nonetheless, she is traumatized by Dura’s death and blocks the event from her mind; disassociating Dura’s bleeding to death from the onset of her own fear of blood. As an adult, Tashi tells Raye about her “lifelong tendency to escape from reality into the realm of fantasy and storytelling.”

*I mean, if I find myself way off into an improbable tale, imagining it or  
Telling it, then I can guess something horrible has happened to me and that  
I can’t bear to think about it... the story is only the mask for the truth?*

(Walker, *Possessing* 132)

Tashi’s unconscious refusal to hear Dura “screaming in (her) ears since it happened” is echoed at Benny’s birth (Walker, *Possessing* 83). Tashi feels “as if there was a loud noise of something shattering on the floor, there between me and Adam and our baby and the doctor. But there was only a ringing silence. Which seemed oddly, after a moment, like the screaming of monkeys” (Walker, *Possessing* 59).

Unfortunately, for the woman, phallogormorphism is privileged at the expense of the pleasure provided by female autoeroticism; as Pierre notes, “Man is jealous of woman’s pleasure... because she does not require him to achieve it” (Walker, *Possessing*182).

Walker’s perspective on life is circular. As Pierre explains to Benny that Tashi’s death is part of a cycle: “NOTHING = NOT BEING = DEATH . . . . BUT EVERYTHING THAT DIES COMES AROUND AGAIN” (Walker, *Possessing* 197). Resistance is the secret of joy because it is the vehicle by which change can occur. Walker’s main preoccupations and interests has been the connection between violence, female sexuality, and the themes of patriarchal oppression of women.

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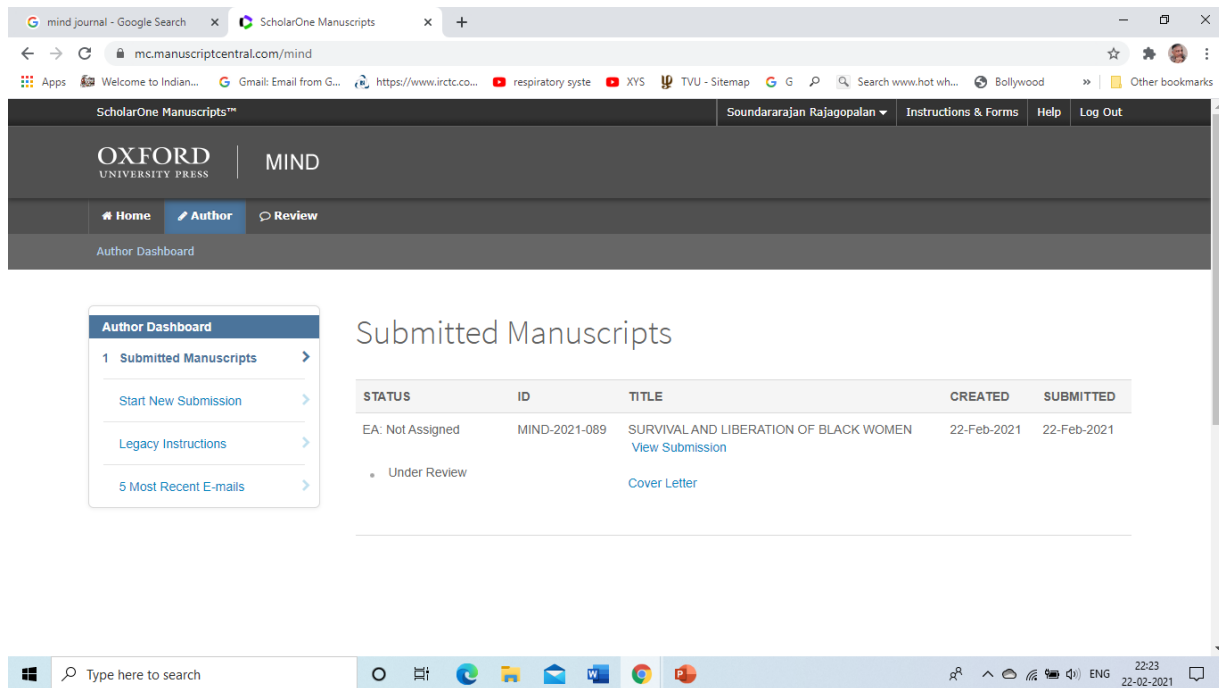
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