

## Female Genital Mutilation: The Infliction Of Psychological And Sexual Trauma On Women In Alice Walker's Possessing The Secret Of Joy

Shivali Kundal (Corresponding Author)<sup>1</sup>, Dr. Kumar Gautam Anand<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Research Scholar, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Sharda University (Greater Noida) India, 201306, Shivalikundal1820@gmail.com

<sup>2</sup>Assistant Professor, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Sharda University (Greater Noida) India, 201306, kumar.gautam@sharda.ac.in

### Abstract

The present paper entitled "Female Genital Mutilation: The Infliction of Psychological and Sexual Trauma on Women in Alice Walker's Possessing the Secret of Joy" intend to investigate the problems experienced by women after mutilation. Female Genital Mutilation or circumcision is a ritual of cutting or removing some or all of the external female genitalia. It is a topic of universal interest practised in many countries. Alice Walker, in her novel, Possessing the Secret of Joy, presents a fictional character Tashi, who is the protagonist of this novel and faces eternal conflicts after circumcision. Alice Walker also discusses Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in this novel. The present paper focuses on how the life of women shattered after undergoing this evil practice, which is socially constructed and has no medical reason but is performed only based on some myths. The primary objective of this paper is to highlight the harmful effects of female circumcision, which includes many severe physical and psychological issues that drag women into a traumatic disorder. This paper aims to reveal how this inhumane praxis oppresses women in the name of culture, how a woman is mangled for her whole life, and her life is spoiled. The conclusion of this research paper conceals that we can eradicate this praxis through knowledge and consciousness, which is attained only through feminist debates that will be helpful for women to put an end to such barbaric praxis.

**Keywords:** Female Genital Mutilation; psychological trauma; sexual trauma; circumcision; oppression.

### **Introduction:**

Women form half of the world's population; still, they are not gratified as men are evaluated in this world. They are exerted to the edge of brutality and subjection and are highly dominated. They are condemned to encounter from the cradle to the grave for no-fault and face inequity. Women are seen as lacking connection to liberty, ability, proficiency, competence and many more primitive authorities, which are essential for humans. As Ernestine Rose, in her lecture on Women's Rights, said that

Humanity recognizes no sex- mind recognizes no sex- virtue recognizes no sex- life and death, pleasure and pain, happiness and misery recognize no sex. Like him, she comes involuntarily into exercise; like him, she possesses physical and mental and moral powers.... like him, she has to pay the penalty for disobeying nature's law, and for greater penalties, she has to suffer from ignorance.... Like him, she enjoys or suffers with her country. Yet she is not recognizes as his equal. (Ernestine Rose's Speech at the Women's Rights Convention - 1851 - Primary Sources, n.d.) [1]

In the present times, where the femininity or the sexuality of a woman is being celebrated throughout the world, there are some countries where some evil rituals like FGM are still practised. In today's modern world woman is considered an expressive part of society, where she is meant to form the entrance of a stable, prosperous and vigorous community. It is extensively acknowledged that women also have the right to the freedom to live successful life without any fear and oppression. However, the condition of women has always been a subservient one. Despite protestation, agitations and resistance, there has been no relief from this social evil, which means that the oppression of women is continued in this world. As William Wordsworth has rightly said, "The women came out of man's rib, not from the feet to be trampled on, not from his head to be superior but from the side to be equal, under the arm to be protected, next to the heart to be loved."

(Matthew Henry Quotes (Author of Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible), n.d.) [2]

Female genital mutilation is a venerable praxis that remains a profoundly entrenched convention maintained by complications of figurative and artistic meanings. It is primarily accomplished in the 29 countries of Africa, the Middle East and Asia. FGM is executed mainly on girls between the age group of 0 to 15 years, preceding the beginning of menstruation. Moreover, it is a highly intricate, perceptive and politicized issue. According to WHO, "FGM comprises all procedures that involve partial or total removal of the external female genitalia or another injury to the genital organs for non-medical reasons." (Female Genital Mutilation, 2020) [3]

This practice was earlier known as Female Circumcision, but after 1980, the term 'Female

Genital Mutilation' existed. The term was officially espoused during the conference of the African Committee in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, which was based on Traditional Practices Affecting the Health of Women and Children and in 1991; its advantages were approved by the United Nations WHO. The WHO has classified FGM into four types, clitoridectomy, excision, infibulation and other harmful practices. In first type of FGM, the clitoris is wholly or partly removed. Type second comprises partial or total expulsion of the clitoris and the labia minora, with or without excision of the labia majora. In the third type, the vaginal orifice is squeezed by creating a covering seal by cutting and positioning the labia minora and the labia majora, with or without excision of the clitoris. Type four includes all other harmful procedures to the female genitalia for non-medical reasons. For example, pricking, piercing, incision, labial stretching and cauterization are classified under this group.

Various International Organizations deliberate Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) as an abuse of human rights and a demonstration of brutality against girls and women. Moreover, being the termination of severe bigotry between sexes, it directorates and sustains disparity and denies women the privilege of physical and psychosexual uprightness. Female Genital Mutilation is a piece of a broad gathering of unsafe traditions for women's well-being depending on the social development of ladies as articles to be exposed to androcentric social goals and guidelines. FGM is said to be pointless. There

is no helpful motivation to circumcise women and girls, and other reasons for doing so are unfounded.

The practice of FGM not only discriminates against women but also cripples them physically and psychologically. Some physical consequences like bleeding, infection, urine retention, menstrual problems, chronic pelvic infection, sexual problems, and difficulty in pregnancy and delivery occur during the operation. Women and girls, which are afflicted by this practice, also suffer psychological consequences, in which women may generate assault of anxiety, sadness, abnormality, phobia and psychopathy.

Women suffering from FGM can have a constant psychological and traumatic effects. It may cause hallucinations, solicitude, shock, turmoil, depression, and persistent irritability. Moreover, it can cause post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), in which women may suffer from memory loss. This practice is done without anaesthesia with intelligent tools such as knives, spears, scissors, needles and spiky rocks. This horrific experience is explained in the rhyme of Somalia girls in the following lines:

Why inflict me with this pain?

This real pain of primitive cultures

In tears, I am, at every stage of my life

Mom and Dad, am I, not a daughter?

Dear Brother, am I, not a sister?

Dear mankind, wherever you are

Am I, not a human being? Tears, Tears,  
Tears (Mankotya et al., 2018) [4]

Men always probe to prevail over women and claim to maintain domination in one way or the other. Women are not permitted to masturbate or relish sensual gratification because, in this male dominant society, it is deliberated as a threat to imperialist phallic rule. Anne Koedt, in *The Myth of Vaginal Orgasm*, stated that The clitoris is the primary source of female sexual pleasure and the vital area to feel sexual pleasure. If the clitoris is obscured, it can induce deduction in female sexual response and may lead sexual response and may lead to anorgasmia and even frigidity. (Gerhard, 2000) [5]

Women masturbation is proscribed in our community as it is deliberated to be an impure activity. So, to repress a woman's sensuality, this evil custom has been used in many countries worldwide. Many myths are related to this practice; some believe it is a religious requirement, and some think it will help a girl enter into womanhood. The uttermost conviction associated with this practice is a correlation between Islamic religions. The history of Islam is the reason for thinking that Islamic culture dominates women. Islam is not a religion which dominates or criticize women. It is, however, a culture where man and woman are recognised as equal, as is documented by various sections in the Holy Qur'an. The essential ethic is that men and women, both dignified members of universe, are blessed with equality and reverence to religiosity and veneration.

Alice Walker had been noted as the foremost writer for subaltern literature. She had endured the main literary idol of black literature. She genuinely discarded with the adversity of women and children. She refined the issues regarding discrimination, feminism and almost every one displayed discrimination. She is the chief women writer who took action to speak about FGM. She came to recognize about this barbaric praxis when she saw a photograph of a black girl with a vacuous look in her eyes in Africa when she was shooting for *The Color Purple* in 1965 (Walker, 2004) . She was astonished, and she committed to publicize this controversial problem worldwide and to induce the true face of the community. She elected her writing as a weapon to make aware people of this cruel practice. Moreover, her novel *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (Walker, 1992) turned out to be a masterwork that discloses all the physical and psychological effects a woman faces after circumcision.

There are also several personal reasons that encourage her to heave light on this harmful praxis. When she got injured by her brother's BB gun shot, and it caused her permanent blindness. She related it to female genital mutilation because she was feeling psychologically mutilated then. This matter had an eminent influence on her life. This abnormality turned her to be an introverted and eremitic child. This eremitic personality assisted her in seeing everything distinctly. This peculiarity impels her to select this communal issue in her novels. She narrates about her injury in *Warrior Marks* (1993) (Walker & Parmar, 1993) ,

I was eight when I was injured. This is the age at which many “circumcisions” are done. When I see how the little girls – how small they are! – drag their feet after being wounded, I am reminded of myself. How had I learned to walk again without constantly walking into something? To see again, using half my vision? Instead of being helped to make this transition, I was banished, and set aside from the family, as is true of genitally mutilated little girls. For they must sit for a period alone, their legs bound, as their wound heals. It is taboo to speak of what has been done to them [...] Without the clitoris and other sexual organs, a woman can never see herself reflected in the healthy, intact body of another. Her sexual vision is impaired, and only the most devoted lover will be sexually “seen”. And even then, never wholly. (Walker & Parmar, 1993) [6]

Walker had made the reviewer imagine concerning the feminine character in human life. The individual’s life is fascinated by the male personality. But because of male discrimination, women were not given any space, significance, or value. As Uniyal states

... The sphere of personal, sexual and reproductive life provides a central focus of most cultures, a dominant theme in cultural practices and rules. Religious or cultural groups are often particularly concerned with “personal law”- the laws of marriage, divorce, child custody, division and control of family property and inheritance. As...much greater impact on the lives of women and girls than those of men and boys, since far more of women’s time and energy goes into preserving and maintaining the personal, familial and reproductive side of life. (Walker, 1992) [7]

Alice Walker has attained the glorious achievement of becoming a very brilliant and authoritative African American writer. To some extent Walker’s writings can be deliberated as a multicultural way of black women’s authorization as well; because of her writings, she has tried to emphasize the issues and disappointment of these women. Several writers like Alice Walker, Gloria Naylor, and Toni Morrison have thrown light on such topics worldwide and have marked out the reality that racism persuades the Afro- American society and because of that, women have to tolerate a lot. Walker’s Possessing the

Secret of Joy (Walker, 1992) is the best novel in which female circumcision is clearly shown.

Possessing the Secret of Joy (Walker, 1992) is a sagacious admonition over the joint disorder of nationalism and sexism. This is the grievous fiction of the African girl Tashi. Through her experiences in life, she determines that white is not the felon this time. With time, she conclusively realizes that African sexism and tribalism are culpable for her mental collision. She was first examined as a minor character in *The Color Purple* (Walker, 2004), later becomes the main character in the novel *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (Walker, 1992), and the whole story rotates around her.

This is an afflictive story of Tashi. Her belief in her culture and to bring on that culture with her to America compels her to agree to the tsuga's knife and be sexually mutilated. This result gives her Trauma that notifies her life and diversifies her individuality. This trauma not only drives her life into darkness but also gave madness to her. Meantime struggling with her afflictive life, she evoked to examine the mythical "reason" created by her ancestors. The reason for doing so was to identify what and why this crucial thing happened to her and to millions of other women and girls who have been going through this practice for thousands of years.

In Olinka, circumcision is obligatory and being an uncircumcised woman Tashi somewhere perceives that she is not a perfect woman like other in her clan. Moreover, In Olinka, uncircumcised women are treated as unclean, which is one of the foremost reasons mothers compel their daughters to go through this evil practice. Some of the women deliberately capitulate themselves since it is disseminated to them by others. As Tashi said, "These marks gave me courage. I wanted such marks for myself". Tashi's childhood friend Olivia implores her not to go through this practice. She pleads with her not to do this ceremony for her brother, Adam, but she ironically responds this way.

Who are you and your people never to accept us as we are? Never to imitate any of our ways? We always have to change [...] You are black, but you are not like us. We look at you and your people with pity. You barely have your black skin, and it is

fading. [...] You don't even know what you've lost! And the nerve of you to bring us a God someone else chose for you. It is always we who have to change.

However, Olivia knew that this decision might form trouble in her life. When M'lissa, a traditional circumciser of the village, untied her legs, she found difficulty sitting and walking. Olivia observed that Tashi's imperious walk had become a stumble. After circumcision, her experience is very grievous. Olivia explains her situation in this form,

It took a quarter of an hour for her to pee. Her menstrual periods lasted ten days. Cramps incapacitated her for nearly half the month. There were premenstrual cramps: cramps caused by them near impossibility of flow passing through so tiny an aperture as M'lissa had left, after fastening through the raw sides of Tashi's vagina with a couple of thorns and inserting a straw so that in healing, the traumatized flesh might not grow together, shuttering the opening altogether; cramps caused by the residual flow that could not find its way out, was not reabsorbed into her body, and had nowhere to go. There was the odour of soured blood, which no amount of scrubbing until we got to America, even washed off.

Through these lines, she represents her grievous journey after mutilation, and she can't pee or move, facing problems in sitting and walking. This thing not only physically crippled her but also psychologically. Olivia observed her "It was heartbreaking to see, on their return, how passive Tashi had become. No longer cheerful and impish".

Walker shows how Tashi followed her clan leader's instructions blindly. She venerates them as 'messiah'. She was cleft into two societies, African and American. Her two individualities harass her. To get the essence, she went through this challenging process.

After circumcision, she finds no reconciliation and pleasure. The influence of circumcision is so intense on her mind that she disassembles herself from human contacts for a long time. Her physical and psychological life was crippled, and she also faced difficulties in her sexual intercourse. Adam always has consolation for her. Because of her circumcision, he was not able to penetrate for the first three months. Tashi said, "Each



time he touched me I bled... There was nothing he could do to me, nothing he could do me that did not hurt". These lines indicated how much difficult and grievous the intercourse was for her. It affirms that there is unrecoverable physical and psychological injury done to her by mutilation. As Tina Mcelory Ansa states,

Tashi not only has scars between her legs, but one as deep on her psyche as well. The circumcision has not only cut away her clitoris, and the possibility of lovemaking that is not painful and humiliating. It has also eradicated her sense of self and her ability to feel. 16

Moreover, Tashi faces many health issues during her pregnancy. Child birth, is always a felicitous point in any mother's life. It magnifies her life because, without it, women are like desolate land, no expectation of productivity. According to Patricia Hills Collins,

To me, having a baby inside me is the only time I am really alive. I know I can make something, no matter what color my skin is and what names people call me... You can see the little one grow and get larger and start doing things, and you feel there must be some hope, some chance that things will get better... The baby is a good sign, or at least he's some sign. If we didn't have that, what would be the difference of death 17

Tashi gave birth to a boy with an abnormality. Her mutilated vagina caused injury to her baby's brain as the baby was too big to arise from her vagina. A significant part of Benny's brain is dejected during her delivery. She always feels regretful for her son. This induces physical collision in her mind; it is distinctly demonstrated when she tries to shape his head with the help of her tongue. She describes childbirth as "His head was yellow and blue and badly misshapen. I had no idea how to shape it properly, but hoped that once the doctor left, instinct would teach me".18

This was something new for doctors as they first experienced this type of situation. Many doctors and medical students came to check on Tashi. She felt deleterious because everybody in the hospital addressed her as weird. After this scene, she experienced distressing dreams every night, which crippled her psychologically. According to Cathy Caruth (Caruth, 1995) ,

Because traumatic events are unbearable in their horror and intensity, they often exist as memories that are not immediately recognizable as truth. Such experiences are best understood not only through the straightforward acquisition of facts but through a process of discovering where and why conscious understanding and memory fail. 19

Tashi's condition was getting so bad that Adam took her to the psychotherapist, who encouraged her to conquer traumatic experiences. A traumatic person must share the experience of life with another person. As Cathy Caruth, in her book, *Trauma: Exploration in Memories* (Caruth, 1995), states, "To cure oneself—whether by drugs or the telling of one's story both—seems to many survivors to imply the giving-up of an important reality or the dilution of a special truth into the reassuring terms of therapy".

Tashi was taken to the psychotherapist by Adam for therapy. He plays a video on a cassette in which a girl is lying on the ground for the ritual of circumcision. In that video, there is also a scene of cock frightening: "It walked about quite freely, crowing mighty, and that was the only sound or movement". After watching this scene, Tashi becomes unconscious. She envisions a hen, not a cock which is awaiting near the cot to gulp the portion of meat to be thrown off after the excision.

A chicken – a hen, not a cock – was scratching futilely in the dirt between the hut and the tree where the other girls, their ordeal over, lay. M'Lissa lifted her foot and flung this small object in the direction of the hen, and she, as if waiting for this moment, rushed toward M'Lissa's upturned foot, located the flung thing in the air and then on the ground, and in one quick movement of beak and neck, gobbled it down.

After gaining consciousness, Tashi starts sketching cock on the walls. She draws the hoof of the cock so big that it cannot be removed from the paper. The psychotherapist asks her, "is this a man's or a woman's foot?" She becomes disconcerted. After returning home, on the same night, she draws the pattern "crazy road". She made a crisscross pattern of dots, which a girl in her childhood created. The next evening psychotherapist asks her, "Are you better for having done it". She responded assuredly without any doubt. She starts lamenting and missing her elder sister, Dura, who died of extreme blood loss during

circumcision. Her paintings reminded her of all her childhood memories. The video clips the psychotherapist showed helped her recognize her enigma distinctly. As Cathy Caruth said, "Psychic trauma involves intense personal suffering, but it also involves the recognition of realities that most of us have not begun to face"<sup>24</sup>.

Tashi did not cry when Dura died in childhood because African tradition claims "you must not cry," but now she laments over her demise. She wonders how M'Lissa, a woman, did so much brutality to all the young girls. She came back to Africa to take her revenge on M'Lissa, who killed Dura. She is prepared to take a chance on her life because she learns that once M'Lissa is destroyed, all Olinkan clan will be wrenched against her because they treat her as a god. In the end, she kills M'Lissa, she is "no more and satisfied". After killing her, she completes the responsibility of saviour that genuinely means to her. This novel shows Tashi as both the martyr and the winner. As she is the victim of circumcision, she is a martyr, but on the other hand, she is winner because she protected many lives in her clan by killing M'Lissa. She was accomplished for breaking the silence of women in her tribe. In the end, all the women of the tribe gathered with her and sang the song of union. "They are awakened by Tashi and informed about the negative effects of circumcision on their psyche and body". Walker feels that sacrifice for the good cause is pleasing. In this novel, Tashi is depicted as black heroes who gave their life during struggle for freedom. She further says;

Dying now does not frighten me. The execution is to take place where this government has executed so many others, the soccer field. I will refuse the blindfold so that I can see all directions. I will concentrate on the beauty of one blue hill in the distance, and for me tomorrow will be eternity<sup>27</sup>

For an indispensable reason, Tashi gave her life to save the future of million of women. When she was accomplished, all her friends, and family members furlled a banner with the slogan "RESISTANCE IS THE SECRET OF JOY!"

As a black woman herself, Alice Walker faces many trouble and endless struggle all throughout her life. On this basis, she always displays sisterly concern for all the victims of hardships and problems. She decided to assist the women who are at risk of this barbaric practice through the character of Tashi

in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. Through the description of Tashi, she contrived a universal fight against Female Genital Mutilation. Her main aim is to show the trauma, stress and pain faced by Tashi. Walker's prospect of life is circular, as Pierre justifies to Benny that death is a cycle component. "NOTHING = NOT BEING = DEATH . . . . . BUT EVERYTHING THAT DIES COMES AROUND AGAIN" (Walker, *Possessing* 197). Furthermore, Resistance is the secret of joy because it is the channel by which change can appear. Walker's main abstraction and concern has been the association between injustice, oppression, female sexuality and fierceness of women.

To conclude, inequality, oppression, and suffering are still major issues for women around the world. Female genital mutilation (FGM), which largely affects girls aged 0 to 15 years, is one such deeply ingrained practise that harms women physically, psychologically, and sexually. It is most prevalent in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. It is essential that nations take decisive action to prevent FGM and address the root causes of gender inequity and injustice. The cycle of violence and discrimination must be broken by education, awareness campaigns, legal action, and support for women's empowerment. We can develop a society where women are really equal and free from all types of oppression and violence by promoting gender equality, upholding women's rights, and encouraging a culture of inclusivity and respect.

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