

Mutilated Life Of Tashi In Alice Walker's Novel Possessing The Secret Of Joy

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Abstract

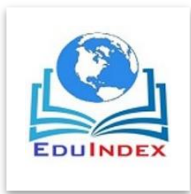
Alice Walker addresses the issue of racism, sexism and gender discrimination in variegated form in her novel Possessing the Secret of Joy. The entire novel is about the circumcision done on Tashi and her consequent physical, mental and psychic trauma. Walker's Possessing the Secret of Joy is an obvious example of a society in which the patriarchal ideologies are dominant and tribe's women, from their early childhood are demanded to follow the male defined customs and norms to preserve the tribe's sanctity. Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) itself is the result of sexism and oppression of women in the name of gender. Walker through this novel has stressed on the fact that women need to debunk tradition and myths that shackle and do no good to them. Walker has vehemently condemned such traditions and through this novel has depicted that the female genital mutilation is one such tradition that should be done away with. Through the 'mutilated life of Tashi', Walker has showcased how women are proselytized to accept such traditions in the name of cultural integrity, ethnic oneness, and mark of a community

Keywords: *African Tradition, Female Genital Mutilation, Racism, Sexism, Traumatic experience of Black woman, Womanism.*

1. Introduction:

Alice Walker is one of the most admired African-American writers writing today. She was influenced by Zora Neale Hurston and was very proud for being a black woman. She was also influenced by Jean Toomer's idea of folk culture as a part and parcel of the black tradition. Growing up in a milieu of oral tradition, listening to stories from her grandfather, Walker began writing, very privately when she was eight years old. Walker's writings include novels, stories essays and poems. They focus on the struggles of African American, particularly women, and they witness against societies that are racist, sexist and violent. Her writings also focus on the role of women of color in culture and history.

Alice Walker has written seven fictions namely *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970), *Meridian* (1976), *The Color Purple* (1982), *The Temple of My Familiar* (1989), *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992), *By the Light of My Father's Smile* (1998) and *Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart* (2005). As a writer, activist, and 'womanist', Walker directs her energies to expose both – the richness and the desolation in the Black community,



particularly in relation to its women. In her works, Walker underscores the folk heritage which has helped African-American culture to survive. She highlights the pain and agonies of the black people. Walker also explores the African part of her cultural heritage, particularly in rural Southern Black life.

The expression 'womanism' has its origin in a unique black American women's cultural, ethical and socio-political stance. Walker regarded this concept as a more vital and accurate description of black American women's ethos in contrast to feminism, which was and is a predominantly white middle-class women's perspective. As Jacquelyn Grant observes in her book, *A Black Theology of Liberation*:

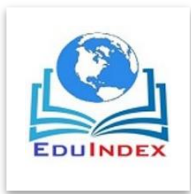
Black feminism grows out of Black women's tridimensional reality of race/ sex/ class. To speak of Black women's tridimensional reality, therefore, is not to speak of Black women exclusively, for there is an implied universality, which connects them with others. (86) [2]

As a womanist, Walker asserts that change is not possible in black women's lives unless they recognize the need for change and hold anyone who obstructs change. In an interview with Brain Lanker, Walker said, "the twentieth century black writers all seem to be much more interested in black community... there just has not been enough examination or enough applications, of findings to real problems in our day to day living" (65). She is committed to write the 'authentic' lives of real Black women, therefore she states in her collection of essay "In Search of our Mother's Garden":

I am preoccupied with the spiritual survival, the whole of my people.... I am committed to exploring the oppression, the insanities, the loyalties, the triumphs of the black women... for me black women are the most fascinating creations. (45) [3]

Alice Walker is of the opinion that black women writers' works are written not to be read but to express themselves and to unravel their own imaginations. So in her works, she relentlessly, ruthlessly delves deep down into the black experience. Her works give an insight into her spiritual journey. Like her African sister-story tellers, Walker also passes on the tale of her foremothers to the children and recreates the stories of her own mother in her writings. Though Walker has worked in a variety of genres, including children's literature, poetry, nonfiction and screenwriting, as a novelist, poet and a feminist, she is best known for her novels, most notably *The Color Purple* (1982) for which she won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. Her novels place more emphasis on the inner workings of African American life, their struggle for survival and their position in America, than on the relationships between blacks and whites.

2. Mutilated Life of Tashi



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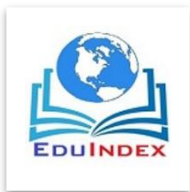


Alice Walker's fifth novel, *Possessing the Secret of Joy* published in 1992 is a telling-tale of suffering and the breaking of taboos of the protagonist, Tashi who is the victim of both racism and sexism. Unfortunately, she faces a kind of psychic disorder during the mission of establishing her 'self'. Obviously, speaking of the 'unspeakable things' about ritual clitoridectomy and genital mutilation of young women, in the womb of the novel, is a great challenging task which Walker undertakes. And she heads on all vilification and deification in the mode of the development of her work, which is a heterogeneous mixture of myth, polemic and drama.

Possessing the Secret of Joy stands out within Alice Walker's writing in many ways. Firstly, it is most 'African' of her novels. Although some scenes take place in Europe and the United States, most of the action develops in the invented Africa of the Olinka tribe, a fictional construction that serves as a background for highlighting the many layers of ideological oppression to which the women population of the novel are subject to. Secondly, its subject matter makes the novel a difficult text – difficult even to read since painful and revolting. In fact, "one does not want to read *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. Instead, clutching one's stomach... one wants to howl to the winds and the heavens in angry protest and despair" (Kuhne 74) [4]; and yet one cannot help but read on. Thirdly, the novel is Walker's literary text that comes closest to political activism.

The novel, *Possessing the Secret of Joy* is a poetic exploration of female circumcision which dates back some two thousand five hundred years ago when it was practised in many countries, especially countries in Africa. In this novel, Walker sheds light on how female circumcision had influenced women physically and psychologically. Some women die during circumcision and some die afterwards as a result of excessive bleeding, while others face trauma. The circumcision ceremony is a custom set by patriarchal social order, which tries to show male dominance over women. This system clearly shows the superiority of males over females. As Coello writes : "Female genital mutilation shows an attempt to confer an inferior status on women by branding them with this mark which diminishes them that they are only women inferior to men, that they even do not even have rights over their bodies"(213) [5]. Walker has used FGC as a tool to signify gender discrimination in the African-American society. The study of *Possessing the Secret of Joy* clearly shows the victimization of women on account of gender and their helplessness due to the rigidity of social norms and culture.

Walker, in *Possessing the Secret of Joy* explores a new kind of epistolary novel in which each individual character writes his or her story for an unknown reader. Tashi, the African woman moves to America and faces psychological problems as a result of repressed memories of her childhood. Through interaction with other people and use of language she is empowered to challenge African tribal rites: this however, leads to her death. Alice Walker informs women about the negative physical and psychological effects of circumcision

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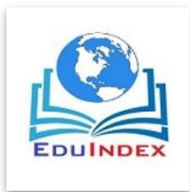
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through *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. She “strongly condemned the practice of female genital mutilation” (Walley 405) [6]. Now it is time for women to be aware of a tradition imposed on women by men for their own pleasure.

Walker examines in her fiction the black women’s search for selfhood and wholeness through an analysis of the individual’s relationship to the community. Her black woman character struggles, gets conscious about the reality, resists against racism and sexism that stifle her growth. Ultimately, she secures a right position within the social network of relationships by shattering the iron bars of gender which limits self-empowerment. Tashi, the protagonist is a tribal African girl and whose painful expressions – a sea of grief, pain, helplessness, prejudice and bias – felt in the heart of the readers. The feeling or sorrows of those black women, who are the victim of the denial of natural sexual activity, is the chief issue of concern in the novel. There is also an attempt to reveal other feminine issues like motherhood- a blessing, sisterhood – as strength in grief. The beginning of the novel *Possessing the Secret of Joy* is covered by a copy of a whole page from *The Color Purple*, which helps in reconnecting the protagonist, Tashi’s painful saga in continuation. Tashi is first talked in Nettie’s letter to Celie in *The Color Purple*. Nettie, Celie’s sister, serves the needy Olinkans; she describes through her letters how the illiterate and narrow-minded parents differentiate between son and daughter in giving education. Tashi is deprived of going to school, on the other hand, Olivia, who is Celie’s own daughter, is adopted by a couple of missionaries and is being looked after by aunt Nettie. She gets education because she is a foreign girl.

The Color Purple explains Olivia’s description regarding Tashi – at the end of the novel. Tashi was planning to scar her face, whereas, in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, Tashi leaves the Olinka village and joins the Mbeles camp in order to undergo Female Genital Circumcision (FGC) which is also called Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), as a symbol of unity and loyalty to her village and its imprisoned leader. She tells her psychiatrist that she was more than willing to give up sexual pleasure in order “to be accepted as a real woman... to stop the jeering” (PJ 120). But the surgery leads her to physical and mental trauma. She is projected as a patriarchal prey which tries to control the feminine or sexuality of a female.

The novel’s ironic beginning is romantic. There is joy in the atmosphere. The childhood friends Olivia and Tashi are deeply close to each other. Tashi has a lover called Adam who is Olivia’s own bother. She crosses the society-drawn limits during erotic lovemaking in the initial phase with Adam. He also, does not follow puritan layers of guilt which was typical when Walker started writing novel. There is a fine contrast combination of Tashi’s fun and frolic which Olivia realizes in her visit to Olinka village and her latter trail and tribulation which Tashi undergoes.



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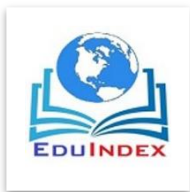
Like millions of other African women, Tashi undergoes a procedure that is often less ritualistic than desexualizing genital mutilation. Walker and many other writers believe that the cultural intent of such mutilation absolutely intends the denial of pleasure for women from all sexual activity. After 'circumcision' Tashi marries Adam and moves to America where she is known as Evelyn Johnson. She feels isolated with her black people because of her guilt-consciousness of ethical disloyalties. Simultaneously the adoption of a western name seems damaging in preserving her identity which creates a sense of incompleteness. Her existence is threatened by new society and culture. Here, her image and outlook is different from others. She feels comparatively ill at ease with adopted culture in the foreign land. There arises recurrent conflict of identity in her mind, and she takes her operation a form of mutilation instead of circumcision.

The character of Tashi can therefore be subdivided into different forms and voices: sometimes the one who is known as the original, 'true' African woman 'Tashi'. Other times, she is half African and half Americanized self, and so the chapter's title is "Tashi-Evelyn". When a hybrid identity is attained, obviously, she is called 'Evelyn'. It is through the lenses of these three separate but connected 'self' that Tashi examines her tragic experience as a victim of FGC. She finds herself fatal victim of FGC. It generates contrariness in her mind and soul. With bruised self, she tries to focus and examine the cause which society has rendered on her.

Tashi's favourite sister, Dura bled to death after undergoing compulsory ritual – circumcision: "That was all Tashi had been told, all she knew" (PJ 8). Due to this fact Tashi develops a trauma related to blood. Once, when she gets hurt while playing with other kids, the sight of blood sets her in panic. Now young Tashi gets conscious of her background that is different from her friend. She decides to express her nationalistic element of being one of the parts of the tribe Olinka and wants herself break free from the Western influence and religion. Her final decision for FGC shows her cultured self determination and allegiance to the political national liberation. Henry L Gates perceives Tashi's helpless circumstances and comments on her decision thus:

As Adam's future wife, in America, should not she attempt to retain as much 'of her African culture as possible? Should not be circumcised? The operation, she feels, will join to her sisters, 'whom she envisioned as strong, invincible. Completely woman. Completely African. (28) [7]

Possessing the Secret of Joy provides a picture of patriarchal community. The town, Olinka represents emotionally bankrupt community. Olinka excludes not only whites but anyone who has not undergone FGC. Olinka is set up according to the strict standards of conventional morality. The sustaining values of the 'funk' are lost through the hegemonic rule of the masculine and the subsequent marginalization of women and the feminine. The



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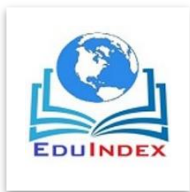


well-being of a community may be measured through the well-being of its children. The abortions, miscarriages, sickly children and dead babies as well as the motherlessness, mother loss, mother-daughter estrangement described in *Possessing the Secret of Joy* represent Olinka's inability to sustain as a community. This is precisely because it is not a community – modeled as it is on patriarchal values of power, status, ownership, and control. These patriarchal values are signified by Olinka's custom of FGC. The Olinka culture refers to FGC as 'bathing' implying that without FGC, a woman is unclean and her genitals are the wounds that need to be healed. Thus, by forcing women to undergo FGC in the name of tradition, the Olinka culture seeks to echo the hegemonic scripts of family relations in which the husband is dominant and the woman is subservient and submissive.

Possessing the Secret of Joy identifies the need to reconstruct black communal identity by showing how the values that hold together the town of Olinka, no longer serves but restrains its inhabitants. Tashi is plagued by traumatic memories that continue to affect her life. Her psyche is fractured as the result of FGC as is evident in different names that she is addressed – Tashi is 'Tashi' the Olinkan, 'Evelyn' the African American, 'Tashi-Evelyn-Mrs. Johnson the Olinkan-American wife of Adam and mother of Benny. And finally she is Tashi Evelyn Johnson Soul, which reveals all the fractured parts of her psyche combined to make an unhyphenated whole. Geneva Cobh Moore who studies the novel in the light of Jungian archetypes offers an interpretation of the protagonist's identities thus:

Tashi, the troubled African child who submits to the tribal rites of scarification and circumcision and upon whom silence is imposed; Evelyn, the scarred adult Tashi who becomes an American citizen; Tashi-Evelyn, the African-American whose cultural duality is dominated by the nightmarished remembrance of her African past' Evelyn-Tashi, the Americanized African whose cultural selves coalesce into a picture of herself as a wounded American and Tashi-Evelyn-Mrs. Johnson, the aging matriarchal composite of selves... And finally there is Tashi Evelyn Johnson Soul who achieves herself upon her reconciliation of opposition.... (114) [8]

Tashi undergoes FGC in order to be accepted as a true Olinkan woman. As a result of Dura's death, Tashi does not undergo FGC when she was a child but she pays a price for being different from other girls of her community. The other villages children tease her and make her feel like an outsider. As an adult, Tashi remains an outsider in Olinkan culture. Not only is she uncircumcised which makes her an unfit wife to an Olinkan man; she is also the friend of African-American missionary family and the wife of a non-Olinkan man, Adam. In America, she feels alienated from herself and her culture and in Africa she still feels that she is not truly Olinkan and decides to have FGC to be done on her in order "to be accepted as a real woman by the Olinka people; to stop the jeering" (PJ 120).

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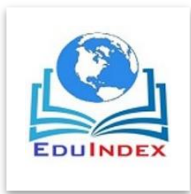
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The consequences of FGC are devastating for Tashi both on physical and psychic levels. After undergoing FGC, Tashi is a changed woman. When a young Olinkan boy, Banse, leads Adam to Tashi in the Mbeles encampment, Tashi is lying down weaving grass mats. Adam remarks on the difference in her demeanor: "The first thing I noticed was the flatness of her gaze. It frightened me" (PJ 40). Thus Tashi is wounded both physically and psychologically. There are other physical ramifications of FGC on Tashi. Urination and menstruation are extremely painful and periods last longer than normal and it is accompanied by two weeks per month of premenstrual cramps and a soured blood odor that makes her want to remain "completely hidden from human contact, virtually buried" (PJ 66). Fear of being "held down and cut open" to give birth by Ceasrean section causes Tashi to decide to abort her first pregnancy, a daughter. Her second pregnancy is complicated as well. Sexual penetration is too painful for Tashi, but despite this fact she becomes pregnant with Benny, also known as Bentu. After an extremely difficult birth that leaves a look of horror on the obstetrician's face, Benny is born.

FGC has further effect of preventing Tashi and Adam from having a normal sexual relationship, causing Tashi to run away from Adam altogether at one point. The disintegration of Tashi's mental state begins at the moment of Dura's death as a consequence of FGC. The circumstances of Dura's death are never explained to Tashi. The repressed memory of Dura's death is part of Tashi's madness. The village women contribute to this repression. Admonishing Tashi not to cry for her sister's death, the village woman predicts that the act of crying for the death will bring them bad luck. Since Tashi could acknowledge neither Dura nor her death, it was as if she had never existed. By silencing Tashi's mourning, eradicating any cause for grief, that aspect of Tashi's identity – sister – is erased. As Pifer observes:

...the trauma of the mutilation, which caused her sister's death, took away her sexuality and arrested her emotional and verbal expression, also inflicted great psychic damage on Tashi....She is forbidden to speak or cry about the loss of her sister.... [She is] unable to speak directly about her painful life circumstances. (50) [9]

Mothers, in *Possessing the Secret of Joy* are scripted as the saviours of daughters, rescuing them from FGC. But in Africa, mothers are seen as an integral part of the larger community. But walker is careful not to blame the mothers for inflicting their daughters with genital mutilation, that practice, she is quite clear, comes from the male elders, who want to ensure their paternity and to maintain control of their women. As Tashi learns about the cultural and mythological reasons to justify female genital mutilation, she remembers overhearing a conversation among the male elders when she was just a girl, one which celebrated men's control of women as divinely ordained and enforced through the actions of the circumciser. Later, as she goes through therapy with three different doctors, Tashi's first



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white-therapist tells her that “Negro women... can never be analyzed effectively because they can never bring themselves to blame their mothers” (PJ 18).

Walker articulates the feminist observation that patriarchal cultures often blames the mother for any and all flaws in the child, and that traditional patriarchal psychoanalysis relies on women blaming as a part of the therapeutic process. But Tashi wisely understands that her mother was also mutilated, and that part of her own healing involves understanding and forgiving her mother for being an unwilling participant in patriarchal culture. As a midwife, M'Lissa tells that the ideal age for surgery of FGC is teenage, which means before puberty. She says, “for a girl’s operation is shortly after birth, or at the age of five or six, but certainly by the onset of puberty, ten or eleven” (PJ 64). But Tashi’s mother, Catherine who had been under missionaries influence is not interested in this ritual. She feels to exempt Tashi from this painful and risky operation.

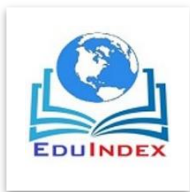
Catherine does not value this system because of the danger of dying like Dura. Her reformed concept of Christianity does not convince her for the essentiality of this ritual. Therefore, it is Tashi, who takes her own stand for surgery. Tashi convinces her mother saying that it is performed in the service to respect ancient tradition which makes her whom she is. Tashi does not only experience ritual circumcision but also has a scar marked on her face. Both are painful. But they are signifiers of her idiosyncratic African identity the only thing that whites failed to erase in the African’s life. Tashi’s awareness for history of Olinka and its rituals proves that she wants change in her mission and action which is a great blow and protest that she can cast against the whites who have been oppressing the blacks from time immemorial:

We had been stripped of everything but our black skins, here and there a defiant cheek bore the mark of our withered tribe. These marks gave me courage I wanted such a mark for myself says Tashi “My people had once been whole, pregnant with life”. (PJ 22-23)

Walker’s inclusion of Carl Jung, the privileged and white archetypal therapist, to heal one of the blacks, proves her element of universalism which her novel yearns for. She appears progressive minded in the matter of human relationship. In the words of George Olakuley:

The appearance of Carl Jung emblemizes the novel’s yearning for universal fellow-feeling. Though white and privileged[Jung] is admitted into the progressive camp in the novel because he uses his knowledge in good ways and transcends the limitations of his cultural formation. Helped by Carl Pierre and her international circles of friends Tashi regains her sanity by recognizing and naming the source of her suffering. (358) [10]

Remaining under Carl’s therapy, Tashi realizes that the “boulder blocking her throat” (PJ 81) is her repressed memory. She becomes a mute and responds to her mind by painting

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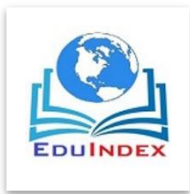
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cocks, by painting a huge peacock on the wall, exhausting the space available and forcing open the boundaries of imagination. She is psychologically conditioned by the taboo not to verbalize pains and so she goes to subconscious state of dream and imagination. Sometimes she loses her consciousness. Tashi's non-verbal mode of expression describes that how it was a taboo matter not to even speak or pronounce directly. Her strange dreams and nightmares indicate her frustration as a woman trapped in a gigantic tower, which can be considered as a cross-cultural representation of woman's enslavement in patriarchal societies. Tashi's attempt to preserve the sanctity of African ritual has impaired her sexually. Her fear of the phallus is mentioned in her words: "...and they've broken my wings! I see them lying crossed in a corner like discarded oars. Oh, and they're forcing something in one end of me, and from the other they are busy pulling something out" (PJ 25-26).

Condemning the patriarchal African tradition, Walker makes it clear that Olinkan women must share the responsibility for their oppression. A special group of women, called tsunga are empowered to perform the surgery and many women pay to be re-sawn after the birth of each child. The novel implies that if the practice of genital mutilation is to be ended, women themselves must resist the procedure by any means necessary, just as Tashi resists by killing her circumciser, M'Lissa. The end of the novel ironically comes a full circle to a moment in which the condemned Tashi is confronted, on the one hand, with the freeing recognition that "RESISTANCE IS THE SECRET OF JOY" (PJ 264) and on the other hand, with the ultimate oppression of being denied her life.

Walker has realistically portrayed the experience of a circumcised woman in the novel. Tashi faces endless problems after the surgery. She is not able to fulfill the needs of her husband. Therefore, she finds the company of his Mistress Lisette a kind of solace. Tashi delivers a mentally challenged boy child whom she really does not love due to her long illness. Thus, Tashi's life as a woman, as a wife and as a mother is destroyed on the account of FGC which is a tool of male patriarchy to kill not only women's sexuality but also her feelings.

Thus, Walker, in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, highlights woman's demand for living a life free of physical tortures. In Olinka, Tashi's motherland, circumcised women are honoured and valued, because female circumcision is a mark of a true Olinka woman. Walker, through the novel, has showcased how naïve young girls are lured into the whirlpool of pain with promises of happiness forever, along with gifts and appreciation, to have no appreciation for the practice later on. Tashi previously thinks circumcision is a mark and also an identity of Olinkan woman. She even feels proud about it. But when she becomes aware of its evil consequences she stands against this brutal practice. As Meena Kumari rightly asserts: "Most of the leading characters in Walker's fiction indulge in acts of aggression against repressive forces to revive back their honour and autonomy" (149). [11]



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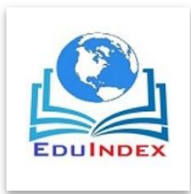
Walker brings a Western female character, Lisette, in contrast to Tashi's life style. She is Tashi's husband's friend and mistress. The French woman Lisette unlike Tashi, enjoys her own ambitious and independent life because she is a genuine feminist living under the guideline of Simon de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1952). She has a sensible explanation for her own world and life. So she does not marry. She uses to enjoy a life of live-in-relationship with Adam who visits Paris twice in a year. She also goes to United States once in a year. Lisette, enjoys full-throated womanhood without any physical and emotional barrier with Adam because she has no patriarchal limitations. Perhaps due to this jealousy Tashi stones Pierre who was born to Lisette from Adam but out of wedlock in France.

Walker has all praise for European Lisette, who is an epitome of spiritual entity. She has a mature brain and well-advanced thought. During pregnancy, she listens to spiritual song to bring forth a sublime child. Tashi suffers her child-birth causing retardation of her child whereas Lisette experienced the culmination of motherhood. Even Lisette says in her own words "I was orgasmic at the end" (PJ 95) Benny prepares a note to express his feelings whose brain is half dead, anyhow survives like a burden on earth, whereas, Pierre emerges as a universal saviour for all women from oppression by sharing his knowledge and wisdom which he has inherited in his mother's womb.

Pierre, who is Walker's scholarly agent, spreads the message of equality among the ignorant souls. Well-educated, rational, sixteen year old adolescent Pierre, has great awareness of Langston Hughes' "the laughing spellbinder", James Baldwin's "the guerrilla homosexual genius" and Richard Wright's "the tortured assimilation and great lover of France". According to Pierre "these men, 'uncles' from my father's side, would be my guides on my American journey" (PJ 136). He is a voracious reader. He reads various books based on human values. Walker's sense of gratitude towards the African American is explicit here. Pierre, a close relative of Tashi, is just like her son who feels great sympathy to her. To heal up her tragic life, he becomes anthropologist to bring positivity and deep confidence in her.

3. Summation:

Walker feels that for any better cause sacrifice is must. So her depiction of Tashi's execution is an essential sacrifice, so that she can save millions of Tashi like women in future. Tashi seems to emerge as martyrs like other black heroes in the past history of America who dedicated their life at the altar of national freedom. Adam, in his attempts to justify Tashi's murder of M'Lissa, the circumciser, in the courtroom, recognizes that Tashi's insane behavior is reactive to the situation she is faced with as a victim of FGC. Before Tashi is shot, her family and friends and well-wishers unfurl a huge banner imprinted with the slogan in capital letters. In it, it is written that: "RESISTANCE IS THE SECRET OF JOY" (PJ 264). Tashi dies joyfully, figured by a metaphor of flight: "I am no more, And satisfied"



(PJ 264). Hence the novel is a caution to the women in the twenty-first century who still silently accept their submissive roles.

4. Abbreviation

PJ – *Possessing the Secret of Joy*

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