ABSTRACT

Walker has endeavoured to develop a very critical and comprehensive view to project loathsome traditions which torture and mutilate not only the body but also the soul of black women. Thematic dimensions in Walker’s fiction deal with an extremely scandalous social issue that restricts the flourishing growth of tender girls beyond human imagination. Walker has attempted to draw reader’s attention in all her writings to the horrendous functioning of circumcision. Walker calls for a war against such heinous customs and raises voice for empowerment of women and their quest for growth and fulfilment.

KEYWORDS: Walker’s Fiction, Horrendous Functioning

INTRODUCTION

Possessing the Secret of Joy projects the evil face of female circumcision and assails dehumanising taboos within black community which deny any flexibility or deviation from the callous system. Society acts like a watchdog and the black women are supposed to be the “transmitters of sacred tradition, ceremony and ritual” (Encyclopaedia Americana, C). They must incorporate community values which are honoured to be divinely created. Complete conformity to community bonds is imposed and any violation may result in ostracism. Projecting the filthy practice of genital circumcision through the character of Tashi in Possessing the Secret of Joy, Walker strongly condemns blind devotion to tribal identity. Most of the leading characters in Walker’s fiction indulge in acts of aggression against repressive forces to revive back their honour and autonomy. Whether dealing with private or public her emotional integrity is committed to fight for the oppressed class.

Cultural Malice and Community Obligation

In Possessing The Secret of Joy, Walker denounces the deadly practice of female circumcision that brutally shattered both the psyche and body of black women, and killed a number of innocent girls. Though legal authorities condemned such fatal customs in Egypt, Kenya, Sudan and passed an order to end female genital cutting, but these could not be implemented. As anti-circumcision laws, “were by-products of external pressure and did not reflect the desire of local people to suppress the tradition”(Gruenbaum 205). Female genital cutting never gained top priority of urgency as African women was engaged in more critical issues of managing food and water for her children and preventing them from dying. Moreover black activist, though battling hard to abolish such ghastly rituals did not welcome outside help and reacted “such involvement as an invasion of privacy, as an interference in African affairs, and as yet another form of imperialism” (Lightfoot 167). In some areas of Nigeria, Ethiopia and Sudan, an uncircumcised woman is humiliated in the most shameful manner and the son of such women is charged with illegitimacy. Infibulations in some countries adheres to a higher ethnic culture and represents obsessive pre occupation with girl’s virginity. “Within the framework of a psycho analytic metaphysics, the women functions like a symptom: she represents a threat while being constructed as a defence against that threat”(Tseelon 12). Even Arab customs such as “veiling, chaperoning, seclusion, segregation...can all be understood as means for maintaining the honour of the family” (Gruenbaum 78). The operation of genital cutting is
generally related to the process of cleaning of private parts. It is also observed as a parameter of chastity and is performed to diminish woman’s sexual urges.

The practice of female circumcision is found prevalent in African countries and also occurs among ethnic groups in Oman, Yemen and some parts of Iraq, Saudi Arabia. The number of victimised girls who have been circumcised varies from eighty five million to one hundred fifteen million. Annual estimate of the number of girls who undergo genital cutting according to Program For Appropriate Technology in Health (PATH) is around two million. Different measures of circumcision are applied by different cultures but whatever may be the dimension of intensity from traditional Sunna to modified Sunna and from clitridectomy to pharaonic circumcision, the operation of cutting and sewing the most sensitive female organ is performed with the crudest instrument of thorns, razors, blades, scissors, kitchen knives and bits of glass, tin and stones without antiseptic or anaesthesia.

Walker’s womanist consciousness was desperately stirred to see such ghastly treatments and she took her writings as a vehicle to transmit her ideas about such a delicate and complex subject. She stated boldly, “It took me twenty five years since I first heard about female genital mutilation to know how to approach it. To understand what it means to all of us in the world that you can have this kind of silencing of the pain of millions of women, over may be six thousand years”(Walker 269).

FEMALE CIRCUMCISION: A FILTHY TABOO

African women are silenced and sworn to secrecy about the magnitude of damage inflicted on them. Though Walker provoked severe criticism for her protest against female circumcision, but no oppression could dwindle her from denouncing ghastly ritual of clitridectomy as a strategy of male domination. In 1946 British Colonial Government prohibited infibulations and passed a law in Sudan to forbid the deadly practice. But apprehending colonial intrusion, the whole population of Sudan immediately infibulated all its daughters though still in infancy, and resulted in many deaths. The ignorant people resented as such interference may be another form of imperialism. Even renowned doctor apprehended that “that kind of help which they think of as solidarity, is another type of colonialism in Israel. So we must deal with female circumcision ourselves. It is our culture, we understand it, when to fight against it and how, because this is the process of liberation” (204).Tashi in Possessing The Secret of Joy looks passionately aggressive to defend tribal honour. She feels that the presence of colonists and white missionaries is a threat to Olinkan tradition, and to save cultural prestige she heroically submits herself to the knife of M’Lissa.

However the issue of circumcision has captured global concerns as it may cause hysteria, haemorrhage, chronic pelvic infection, dysmenorrhoea, infertility, difficulty in child birth and even death. The gynaecologist feels that “the pharaonic could hide a lot of diseases-perhaps tumours, anything. These women could not be properly diagnosed because it was impossible to introduce instruments to examine them. So they remained untreated or had to submit to operations simply to permit diagnosis”(Lightfoot 12). Female genital cutting may also cause spread of AIDS and severe health hazards. Recent psychological research has revealed that any damage to circumcision to female body that is basically more fragile tends to divert the victim from normalcy and causes uncontrollable disorder and emotional instability. Tashi looks hysterical and suffers psychological clitridectomy after going through operation. In defiance of her white missionary friends, Tashi eagerly looks to submit herself to the sinful ritual of circumcision as this is “the only remaining definitive stamp of Olinka tradition” (23). White men’s gospel or God can not be deemed righteous or satisfying. Tashi reflect cultural bonding and even goes for carving sacrificial tribal marks on her face that would make her identifiable forever as member of Olinkans. But she never knew that marks on her face would set her apart from the Western community. Walker
Tribal Frenzy in Alice Walker’s *Possessing the Secret of Joy*

Takes the readers into taboo territory and suggests that such taboos must be broken. Tashi’s sister Dura died of bleeding during genital cutting and the sight of blood leads Tashi to a traumatic state of panic.

Tashi committed herself to circumcision as tribal frenzy excited her to stand for Olinkan honour like a strong and completely courageous women. But immediately after circumcision she deeply regrets the blunder she has made. Her proud walk shuffled and she is stunned to realize, “how had I entrusted my body to this mad woman” (151).

Infibulations has irreparably damaged her physical and mental health and as Olivia stated, “her soul had been dealt a mortal blow”, and it was “plain to anyone who dared looked into her eyes”(66). Tashi’s horrible ordeal at the time of the birth of her baby Benny is all the more awful and extremely complex as the obstetrician broke also instruments trying to make the baby to come out safe. She used scalceit, a pair of scissors and severed cartilage from home. Tashi is shocked to see the baby. “Her head of yellow blue and badly misshapen.” I had no idea how to shape it properly, but hope that once the doctor left instinct would teach me” (57). And later on instinctively Tashi used her tongue to shape the baby’s head properly. Her state of mind is acutely disturbed and she dreams of herself trapped in a gigantic tower with broken wings. Her confinement in the tower symbolises patriarchal enslavement and cultural constraints which put her in a state of mental trauma. “They have broken my wings!! I see them lying crossed in a corner like discarded oars. Oh’ and they are forcing something in one end of me, and from other they are busy pulling something out”(27)

Walker has been criticized for applying cultural imperialism as she deals with the issue more as an American than African. Through Tashi, the novelist seems to protest against the version in the epigraph that black people possess the secret of joy. Tashi is determined to counter blast the system and kill T’Sunga, M’Lissa who killed her many years back. She proudly explains, “I placed a pillow over her face and lay across it for an hour. Her sad stories about her life caused me to loose my taste for slashing her” (276). The epigraph in the form of a ‘Bumper sticker’ in the opening of the novel symbolises black people’s passive submission to the evil dictate of patriarchy. The epigraph reads, “when the axe came into the forest, the trees said the handle is one of us” (i/ii).

The blade of the axe and the forest indicate patriarchal dominance that cuts the wings of its own daughters and any violations to its command may lead to drastic ruin. Walker dedicated a part of royalty of her books to educate men and women to the hazardous consequences of genital mutilation that cripples the growth not only of the victimised individual but the whole society where it is practiced. Walker as a womanist and social activist has succeeded in drawing attention towards the forbidden territories of patriarchal culture. As a responsible black artist, Walker seems to have revolutionised the society to end circumcision of women and succeeded to save lives of millions of girls who have no choice in their life but to surrender to the knife of M’Lissa.

REFERENCES
