

**The Black Woman's Selfhood in Alice Walker's
*Possessing the Secret of Joy***

Lâle Demirtürk

dturk@bilkent.edu.tr

Alice Walker examines in her fiction the black women's search for selfhood through an analysis of the individual's relationship to the community. In Walker's novels, the black women's struggle to claim their selves, in order to change their lives and secure a rightful place within the social network of relationships they themselves constitute, usually absorbs the psychic pain involved in such a struggle and shatters the iron bars of gender which limit self-empowerment. The author herself explains: "I believe in ... a willing acceptance of responsibility for one's thoughts, behavior and actions, that makes it powerful. The white man's oppression of me will never excuse my oppression of you, whether you are man, woman, child ... because the self I prize refuses to be owned by him. Or by anyone" (*The Third Life of Grange Copeland* 345).

The Color Purple (1982), her best-known novel, explores the development of black female identity (see Demirtürk) through the story of its heroine, Celie, as she grows toward selfhood. The process of struggle for change is revealed through Celie's complex relationships with her stepfather Alphonso, God, Mr. __, Harpo, Sofia, Nettie and above all Shug Avery. In feeling the pride of being black women who do not submit to oppression, Sofia and Shug offer her the strength of self-definition, while again Shug and later Nettie provide her with self-knowledge and a sense of self-empowerment. Thus, re-connecting with her own self and with God through the female network system, Celie learns to become her own person.

Celie's daughter-in-law, the African woman Tashi, is the protagonist of *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992), which explores the complex web of relationships between pain (ritual) and womanhood (resistance), and shows how, in the process of forging female selfhood, the struggle forces the need to change the ritual. This paper discusses the psychological impact of the ritual of female circumcision on Tashi--our "familiar" from *The Color Purple*.

In America as Adam's wife, Tashi reminisces on her African experience. Even though Olivia tells her not to go to the ritual, Tashi wants to undergo genital mutilation, and also, have a scar (tribal sign) marked on her face. Both are painful, but they are the signifiers of her idiosyncratic African identity--the only thing that whites failed to erase in the Africans' lives: "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."

Tashi has never forgotten how her favorite sister Dura bled to death during the ritual, without even having the right to voice her agony, since the dictum determines: "'You mustn't cry!'" (*Possessing the Secret of Joy* 24, 15). The seven weeks' stay on the farm helped the mother and Tashi suppress their pain.

The unvoiced pain still troubles Tashi--now Evelyn Johnson in the United States--in her terrifying dreams, to the degree that she tries to mutilate herself in her sleep--a subconscious act to share Dura's pain--to be rid of the guilt of having been unable to reach out and help her.

Later, while in Switzerland, Tashi has a breakdown after seeing peacocks in a film *Old Man (Mzee)*--Lisette's uncle--shows. Tashi is unable to deal with the horror that genital mutilation evokes in her. She responds by painting cocks; by painting a huge peacock on the wall, exhausting the space available and forcing open the boundaries of imagination. Her psychological tension, which she expresses as "Emotions that had frightened me insane" (*Possessing the Secret of Joy* 83), has reached such an enormous proportion that she cannot control it: once the repressed pain and fear rise to the surface of her conscious mind, Tashi, conditioned by the taboo not to verbalize pain, and yet compelled to vent open her feelings, can only deal with them through a non-verbal medium.

Tashi's attempt to preserve, through the ritual, what is African in her destroyed her sexuality. Lisette, Adam's friend and mistress, seems to have kept what Tashi has lost in pain, since she enjoys her womanhood without physical/emotional pain. Perhaps this is why Tashi stones Pierre, Lisette's son from Adam, born out of wedlock in France, in order to prevent his entrance to their home. Tashi's jealousy makes her open with her duplicate key Adam's hidden drawer and read Lisette's letters. Lisette's joy of womanhood and motherhood is something Tashi is doomed never to experience with Adam, who, in the past, was unable to penetrate her for three months because of her circumcision: "Each time he touched me I bled ... There was nothing he could do to me that did not hurt" (*Possessing the Secret of Joy* 60). Tashi ends up experiencing a very difficult pregnancy and having an equally difficult time giving birth to Benny.

Incapacitated for a long time by the circumcision, "the hidden scar" (*Possessing the Secret of Joy* 66) between her legs, she has always heard in her ears Dura

screaming. Tashi's recounting of her own circumcision--the rite of initiation into womanhood--to her psychiatrist Raye is a form of exploring the African myth that if women are not circumcised clitoral erection would render them "masculine" (*Possessing the Secret of Joy* 121) and that, therefore, vagina lips and clitoris should be cut off to "kill" the male instinct in the woman. However, circumcision leaves its life-long impact on women; mutilated, they will never be able to have full orgasm. Tashi's plight emphasizes "the connection between mutilation and enslavement that is at the root of the domination of women in the world" (*Possessing the Secret of Joy* 139).

Tashi's psychological tension, along with her failure to forget Dura's screams and death, lead her to the point of murdering M'Lissa, the aged circumciser of the Olinka Village, now also in the New World. As M'Lissa explains, before Tashi kills her, she herself was destroyed by the ritual and limped throughout her life. She is not the only person guilty of causing young girls' pain and death, she says, because Tashi's mother also held Dura down as she circumcised her. M'Lissa's own mother--a circumciser as well--used to hide a black clay smiling female doll touching her genitals, an image of a woman who enjoys sex, in the bark of a tree in the forest. Transforming her individual act and need of embracing her repressed womanhood into a ritual itself, the mother circumcised M'Lissa lightly to maintain her daughter's right to enjoy sex, but to no avail. Noticed by other women who took over, M'Lissa's circumcision was finalized in great pain. Yet, even though M'Lissa herself is as much a victim of the ritual as Tashi and Dura are, she still believes in its validity, convinced that it is performed "In service to tradition, to what makes us a people. In service to the country and what makes us who we are" (*Possessing the Secret of Joy* 226). Her conception that the pain a woman feels in preserving and transmitting the tradition is insignificant runs contrary to Tashi's personal experience: M'Lissa had sewn her so tightly that intercourse had proved to be very difficult for Adam and herself. What causes Tashi's loss of self-control, however, and make her commit the murder, is M'Lissa's cold-blooded response--"If Dura is not bathed ... no one will marry her" (*Possessing the Secret of Joy* 257)--to Tashi's account of her hiding near the hut where Dura was taken to be circumcised and hearing her sister's screams, as the latter, infected, lay dying.

When Tashi is jailed, during her trial, her family helps take care of the patients in the prison hospital. The male patients voice experiences corresponding to that of Tashi. One dying student tells Adam that he never had real sex with his wife, and had to try anal sex, which made her bleed to death. The story demonstrates that it is not just womanhood that is crippled but black manhood as well--by a ritual that destroys black male/female interaction through sex.

A day before her execution, Tashi's need to write to Lisette, now dead, is her need to communicate with Adam through her--to reach out to the woman she herself could have been, if not for the ritual.

In forcing herself to go through the ritual, Tashi manages to preserve her racial identity at the expense of her gender identity. Since she does not have the power to destroy the ritual, she destroys the agent--M'Lissa, who is, ironically, another victim. In ancient times, women's blood was sacred, leading priests to smear it on their foreheads to symbolize the "rebirth: the birth of the spirit" (*Possessing the Secret of Joy* 207), and allowing women freedom of movement: the "'early African woman, the mother of womankind, was notoriously free!'" (*Possessing the Secret of Joy* 278). Tashi's wish to wear a red dress, commemorating the color of the earlier African woman's sacred blood, to inherit her freedom, makes her re-connect with a past, devoid of racial/gender oppression--a protest, but also a celebration that men do not realize. In response to a white colonialist author's racist remark--"Black people are natural, they possess the secret of joy, which is why they can survive the suffering and humiliation inflicted upon them" (*Possessing the Secret of Joy* 271)--other women along with her family re-define and celebrate the true secret of black people's joy with the words written on the banner: "RESISTANCE IS THE SECRET OF JOY!" (*Possessing the Secret of Joy* 281). Tashi's joy in celebrating her resistance is marked in her refusal to be blindfolded during the moment of execution, for she wants to look at the sky--the symbol of freedom--to capture "that moment [as] eternity" (*Possessing the Secret of Joy* 279).

In contrast to M'Lissa who has been victimized by a ritual she in turn uses to "victimize" others, and who refuses to struggle against a tradition that cripples women, Tashi resists the ritual, enacts her struggle against the oppressor, by halting M'Lissa, the executor of the myth. Even though murder is a negative version of liberation, Tashi shows her courage to change a situation that prevents the African female self from blossoming into wholeness. Tashi's destruction of M'Lissa presents the case that women should not continue "destroying" the joy and pride of womanhood in an attempt to serve the masculinist myth sanctioning the lack of female self-empowerment.

Tashi's execution is mythical in the sense that her act of resistance, to a tradition that stifles her wholeness, creates the true freedom of the self. Tashi dies in peace, with no M'Lissa left behind to kill another Dura "screaming her terror eternally into her own ear" (*Possessing the Secret of Joy* 166). Tashi's dying is not only a spiritual transcendence of the life-long pain she endures, but is also a forceful act of claiming the right to inherit the dignity and self-empowerment of the early African women. It is an attempt to capture the ancient African women's life as the unvoiced resistance to the destruction of female selfhood--an act that demands courage. In dying, Tashi reconciles herself to the ancient African women's vision of freedom.

In all her novels, Alice Walker examines black women's struggle, the courageous fight they put up against a racist and sexist society that stifles their growth towards selfhood and wholeness. The struggle in and of itself requires the need to reach an understanding of the racial past, as a meaningful part of the present, in order to redeem the self. Moreover, developing a consciousness to inherit the black heritage

renews the black woman's sense of race and place, expanding her vision into a larger world. Celie, in *The Color Purple*, re-visualizes the sense of female community to find her true self; Tashi, in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, literally lifts the African women to the level of history, which has long "circumcised" their identity from its memory. She attempts to redefine the community of African women who have endured the "mutilation" of their gender identity in order to protect what lies at the root of their spiritual and racial heritage--the Afrocentric self.

Works Cited

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