

## Alice Walker'ın *Sevincin Sırrına Sahip Olmak* Adlı Romanında Afrikalıların Özyıkımı

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### Özet

Alice Walker'ın kaleme aldığı *Possessing the Secret of Joy* adlı eser, Afrikalıların Batılılar ile farkında olmadan yaptıkları iş birliğinin sadece kendi doğal kaynaklarını değil, aynı zamanda sömürü ve kadın sünneti yoluyla kendi toplumlarını da yok etmelerine dikkat çeken bir romandır. Bununla birlikte, Afrikalıların aç gözlülükleri ve ilkel geleneklerine körü körüne bağlılıkları nedeniyle kendi sonlarını nasıl hazırladıklarını ortaya koymaktadır. Bu açıdan, bu makalenin amacı Afrikalı kadınların sünnetten kaynaklı çektikleri acılara ışık tutmak ve Afrikalıların doğal ekosistemin tahribatı konusunda Batı ile bilinçsizce iş birliği yaptıklarında nasıl varlıklarını yitirdiklerini açığa çıkarmaktır. Araştırmanın bulguları, Afrikalıların kendi doğalarını Batılılar ile iş birliği yaparak yok ettiklerinde ve de kadınların sünnet edildiğinde ortaya çıkacak olumsuz etkilerinin farkında olmadıklarını göstermektedir.

### Anahtar Kelimeler

Alice Walker  
Afrikalılar  
İntihar  
İş Birliği

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## Self-Destruction of Africans in Alice Walker's *Possessing the Secret of Joy*

### Abstract

*Possessing the Secret of Joy* by Alice Walker is a novel which highlights undeliberate collaboration of African people with the West to destroy not only their own natural sources but also their own community via exploitation and female circumcision. It deals with these themes and shows how Africans prepare their own ends because of their greediness and blind attachment to their primitive traditions. In this respect, the purpose of this article is to shed light on the deformation of African women generation due to enforced circumcision and to reveal how Africans lose their existence when they unconsciously collaborate with the West on the devastation of the natural ecosystem. The findings of the study demonstrate that Africans are too ignorant to understand the negative effects of wilful exploitation of the forest and genital mutilation.

### Keywords

Alice Walker  
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### About Article

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## Introduction

Alice Walker who is the owner of prestigious Pulitzer Prize focuses on the deliberate violation of African eco-balance together with the collaboration of the Europeans represented by the pharmaceutical company and illegal female circumcision in her novel *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. As a matter of fact, she tries to create awareness on the global ecological crisis via literature to prevent people from destroying the natural community and their own culture. Walker blames the Africans since they die due to their own natural destruction when they cannot resist against the temptations (!) of the West. Their poverty and greediness lead to African cooperation in the destruction of the ecosystem. Collaboration of African people on the exploitation of the natural sources is well-knitted thanks to characterizations and geographical setting since Walker smartly created faceless people to represent the exploitation of European countries such as England and France over Africa. These people offer the local African boys more meat and guns in return for killing monkeys. By this way, African people consume themselves as they are tempted by the materialism of the so-called civilization.

Powerful occident countries accept that African life is made for experiments rather than challenging against the infectious diseases imposed by the Western cultures. Besides the psychological and mental pain, the Africans suffer from gradual death of HIV AIDS which is infected by the blood remains of the animals they decapitate for the West. European countries do not lose anything in their exploitation of Africa. Therefore, they do not refrain from doing worse as they benefit from it unlike the natives. Additionally, African women are forced to genital mutilation, and thus they suffer not only emotionally but also physically. According to Gourdine, A.K.M., *Possesing the Secret of Joy* "is a novel by a woman, about women which argues for the rights of women" (1996, p. 237). In this respect, the purpose of this article is to shed light on the deformation of African women generation due to enforced circumcision and to reveal how Africans lose their existence when they unconsciously collaborate with the West on the devastation of the natural ecosyst.

## Destruction of Natural Balance

Alice Walker puts forward that Africans also indirectly commit suicide by collaborating with the Europeans. She regards western people as faceless as they give direct damage to the nature by the institution (!) named as "pharmaceutical company". As a matter of fact, they deceive the ignorant African boys by promising them material possessions. They encourage African boys by offering them positions in their factory (p. 263). Additionally, they promise more money and food for killing monkeys and chimpanzees as many as possible. This company also exposes these animals to intolerable treatments to test some medicines. By this way, they violate the ecological balance and harmony of the nature. The so-called company provokes young African boys to slaughter even the male monkeys which are vital for the regeneration although they are not wanted. Hartford, an ignorant African boy, states that "Only the females and babies were wanted..." (p.264). However, the natives also kill male ones just for pleasure, and thus the nature loses its balance due to their irresponsible attitude. Although they are aware of the approaching danger of extinction, they never give up killing their nature just for the sake of money.

The pharmaceutical company tortures the animals and destroys the natural habitat. Unfortunately, young Africans unknowingly support this illegal institution by hunting the wild animals with the equipment provided by the Western company. Without any hesitation, it degrades and devastates the natural peace of the African rainforests by exploiting the weaknesses of the African people. These black people want to increase their life-standards since they highly suffer from the inevitable results of poverty. To illustrate, Hartford who dreams of being a doctor accepts the offer of "pharmaceutical company" for hunting African monkeys and chimpanzees the kidneys of which are used for the manufacture of new vaccines for the welfare of the humanity. The point he does not take into consideration while damaging the nature is that he unknowingly prepares his own end while he improves the conditions of the Western communities.

Furthermore, Hartford wants to be strong in order to "struggle for political freedom and cultural survival of his people in the face of cultural invasion of the Western world" (Hernton 1987, p. 68)" since he is affected by the power of industry, technology, and material wealth. Believing that the company will help him to reach his aims in life, Hartford continuously appreciates the power of the company, and he states that "We had always hunted monkeys and chimpanzees, they reminded us... Only now there would be money, and of course, often there would be meat. Both to eat and to sell...We loved our guns" (p.263). In addition to this, Hartford regards his employers "Hearty fellows" (p.265). Based upon the description of Hartford about the Europeans, it can be claimed that Africans do not realize the upcoming dangers, and they destroy the African rainforest monkeys and chimpanzees without thinking its hazardous results since they are charmed by the financial power they may possibly get at the end of the day.

It is evident in the novel that "pharmaceutical company" exploits the ignorance of African people. It should not be forgotten that mass decapitation of animals leads to infectious diseases like HIV AIDS which reminds us of corona virus that all the world fatally suffers from in 2020 and 2021. Ignoring the dangers that may arise from infectious diseases, black people slaughter the monkeys. The Africans are pleased with the money they obtained, and they are taught how to use fatal materials like guns. However, they are not informed about the precautions they should take against such pandemic illnesses since they are uncivilized. Therefore, they are the ones to suffer from the results of the experiments Western people try on the dead animals. They do not lose anything even if their experiment fails or succeeds since they can turn back to their safe hometowns. Instead, African people suffer from the effects of the experiments as they willingly help the Westerners destroy their own vicinity. Hartford states that "They did not see you when they looked...we felt we did not exist to them" (p.263). At this point, the young African boy forgets the fact that Europeans never see black people as their equals, and they never miss any opportunity to exploit natural sources no matter how dangerous it is for the future of the black continent.

Although nature is regarded as a silent place for the western company workers, it is alive for the natives. As a matter of fact, nature is like the body parts of African people, and they approach it as their friends. For example, Hartford uses pronouns related to humanity like "his, he, him" while talking about the animals in nature unlike the Europeans. Despite their understanding of nature, the natives never miss any opportunity to slaughter it as in the case of Hartford following words: "I grew to identify, and sometimes mimic, chimp and monkey behavior...If we captured his mate or child, he would often follow so closely and with such

disregard for his own safety it was easy to shoot him” (p. 263). This means that Africans even do not show any mercy for the baby monkeys which play important role for the refreshment of the generation, and thus they turn into machines like the workers of pharmaceutical company.

Walker portrays the Africans as poor, greedy, and weak to resist against the favors of Europeans. It is evident that the temptations of pharmaceutical company affect the African young generation since they want to increase their social status. Although Africa is a self-sufficient continent in terms of obtaining meat from the forest, they go after more meat. The main reason lying behind this temptation is the hunger of getting more power for the black people. They believe that the more they kill animals, the powerful they are going to be. Therefore, Africans start to kill more animals out of their needs not for meat but for to get the consent of their white masters, and by this way they unknowingly collaborate with the Europeans in destroying their own nature.

Poverty and ignorance are two important factors that lead Africans to work together with Europeans to destroy ecosystem of the rainforest. In addition to them, greediness for a position to get financial benefit increases their temptation. However, they are unconscious about the possible dangers and threats waiting for them as the little African children are exploited to take the kidneys of the monkeys and chimps out with their knives. Adults are also happy with this collaboration since their children contribute to the economy of their home by ignoring the effects of HIV AIDS. Olivia states that

[P]eople in neighboring [African] country were first infected by scientists who injected them with a contaminated vaccine against polio. The vaccine had been made from cultures taken from the kidneys of the green monkey. The vaccine, though presumably a prophylactic against polio had not been purified and carried with it the immune deficiency virus that causes AIDS (p.251).

Despite this knowledge, Africans never give up hunting monkeys and chimps for the welfare of pharmaceutical company. They can never consider and sense independently. Unfortunately, they pay the price of their damage to the nature by losing their lives as in the case of Hartford who dreams of being a medical doctor. Like the other African boys, he dies young by suffering from infectious HIV AIDS. His final words illustrate his submission to his creator rather than the power that the Europeans impose on African people: “*Father, thank you for hearing my confession*” (p.266). When European man, Adam, witnesses the sorrowful death of Hartford, he is also horrified: “I groaned in my agony, almost exactly as he had done ...” (p. 265). Like the death of Hartford, Africa is metaphorically dying, and its ecosystem gets worse day by day as there is no balance left due to excessive unnecessary hunting of wild animals. However, the western company never loses anything, and therefore it never stops exploiting the natural sources of Africa. It is explicit that blind loyalty to external powers lead to unreparable problems.

### **Willful (!) Female Genital Mutilation**

The other issue that causes to devastation of African society is the volunteer practice of women circumcision. Alice Walker criticizes this painful and inhumanly tradition throughout the novel. In their book entitled *Warrior Marks: Female Genital Mutilation and the Sexual Blinding of*

*Women*, Walker and Parmar highlight this problem with the following words: "One hundred million women in African, Asian and Middle-Eastern countries have been genitally mutilated causing unimaginable physical pain and suffering" (1993, p.55). Walker sheds light on this topic via the character of an African woman, Tashi, who intricately feels obliged to lead her life in strict "conformity with the norm of her Olinkan culture" (Gruenbaum 2000, p.13). Tashi's desire to comply with the customs of her vicinity gives her not only physical but also psychological disorder. Although she has witnessed the possible dangers she may subject to after the operation, she does not hesitate to submit her body for the circumcision to continue an uncivilized and unhealthy tradition just for the sake of demonstrating her strict loyalty to the Olinkan culture.

Every Olinkan women believed that they should be circumcised to satisfy their men more in their sexual affair. Due to this belief, African women consent to be circumcised no matter how painful it is. Tashi's ignorance(!) of the prospective hazardous results of circumcision and her blind obedience to the traditions prepared her for this horrible operation. She is so obsessed with the idea of circumcision to show her loyalty to Olinkan leaders that nobody could persuade her from giving her body to the knife of *tsunga*, the circumciser. When her friend Olivia begs her not to have herself genitally mutilated, she fights her: "You want to change us, I said, so that we are like you. And who are you like? Do you even know?" (p.22). Although Olivia talks for her goodness, Tashi does not care of her warnings since the chief of the tribe regards women circumcision as a natural process. This attitude of Tashi clearly exemplifies the African blind loyalty to their traditions.

Filled with a sense of victory in her Olinkan identity, Tashi goes to *tsunga* asking for "the operation because she recognized it as the only remaining definitive stamp of Olinkan tradition" (64). She believes that the operation will help her to join the women warriors of her society. She voluntarily submits her body and *tsunga* practices the agonizing operation since Tashi regards it as a sign of their identity. She feels herself like an amazon who fights for her people and honor before the deadly procedure. Her clitoris is cut, and a small aperture is left "after fastening together the raw sides of Tashi's vagina with a couple of thorns and straws" (p.65). In this way, Tashi obeys the will of her community like millions of Olinkan girls by going through genital mutilation. The temptation for fitting into Olinkan tradition is so strong for Tashi that she sacrifices her body willingly without knowing the results of the inhuman operation in order to protect her tribe and its rituals:

Women were obliged to forget about their own issues and put the needs of the nation ahead of theirs. It would have only been selfish of them to discuss their own rights while their continent was being ravaged and their traditions destroyed. Such messages were used by men to continue propagating female sexual mutilation (Vartolomei 2012, p.68).

Tashi does not care about her own health for the sake of tribal traditions. Before circumcision, she was a girl full of love, entertainment, and happiness. She would have good affairs with her friends and vicinity. However, the operation has affected her so deeply that she starts to suffer from both physical and emotional problems. Adam narrates how circumcision has made a dramatic change in Tashi's personality. Tashi becomes "no longer cheerful or impish. Her movements, which had always been graceful, and quick with the liveless of her personality, now became merely graceful. Slow. Studied" (p.66). She suffers from unbearable psychological

problems and identity problems as Vijay Songire and Kamalakar Gaikwad highlight in their article: “[T]he women face the problem of existence due to the practice of female genital mutilation” (2015, p.3). Evidently, Tashi has lost her life-energy, and now she shows certain contrast to her previous personality.

She loses her emotions and feelings as a result of surgery and becomes a robot, I could not tell if she was happy to see me. Her eyes no longer sparkled with anticipation. There were as flat as eyes that have been painted in, and with dull paint. There were five small cuts on each side of her face, like the marks one makes to keep score while playing tic-tac-toe. Her legs, ashen and wasted, were bound (p.43).

Additionally, her physical condition is also violated and she even has difficulty in walking properly. In addition to this, it takes her a quarter of an hour to pee and her period of menstrual starts to last more than ten days. This situation is too difficult for a woman to bear. She badly suffers from cramps after the operation, and she cannot lead a peaceful life. In the novel, she herself explains her physical situation after the operation with the following words: “I am like a chicken bound for the market” (p.44). Through depiction of Tashi’s condition, Walker asserts that genital mutilation prevents women from their normal human life. Primitive materials used in the operation may infect and kill innocent African girls since they are “unwashed, unsterilized sharp stones, tin tops, bits of glass, rusty razors, and gringy knives” (p.251). For example, Tashi is shocked with the death of Dura, her sister, while she is operated as she bleeds excessively. Her death is not different from murder in the eyes of Tashi. According to Julia Kristeva, “Tashi is a melancholic subject who loves the lost object; her sister” (1980, p. 11). She cannot clearly voice her grief and this condition causes her deep melancholy.

What makes reader restless more about Dura’s death is the way she is buried by the women of her village. Although these women eyewitness the inevitable results of circumcision, they aimlessly keep their silence, and they show no reaction to what the elders of their community lay down for them. Only after his sister’s tragic death, Tashi blames these women as it is their submission that lets them exploit: “In Olinkan culture, mothers tell their daughters that they should comply with traditions, that to be “bathed” -as the euphemism goes- will make them more valuable to their families, their future husbands, and their people”(Lauret 2011, p.157). If they raised their voice against this inhuman practice, the next generation would not have to be exposed to it. As a matter of fact, they prepare their own ends with their own hands like Hartford does by killing the monkeys unnecessarily.

Men enforce women to experience circumcision for their own pleasure by ignoring their partner’s health. They consider that circumcised women enable them more sexual pleasures when compared to uncircumcised ones. However, women suffer from sexual relationships while their partners fulfill their satisfaction. Tashi confesses that whenever she has sexual affair with her husband, she painfully bleeds: “Each time he touched me I bled. Each time he moved against me I winced. There was nothing he could do to me that did not hurt” (p.57). For Walker, African men are selfish towards their wives since they only think about their own sexual satisfaction rather than their wives’ health.

Furthermore, genital mutilation damages the future generation of Africans as it makes difficult for women to give birth a baby. Tashi’s son, Benny, is retarded due to woman circumcision. The obstetrician could hardly take the baby come out safe as her vagina is narrowed in the

operation. In other words, circumcision hurts both mothers and children as in the case of Tashi: "Benny, my radiant baby, the image of Adam was retarded. Some small but vital part of his brain crushed by our ordeal" (p.58). Tashi is shocked to see the baby since his head is badly misshapen, however, she is now remediless and both of them have had to suffer from the negative effects of circumcision. Therefore, it can be said that this evil practice of female circumcision is not different from suicide for African women as in the case of Tashi. Not only the mother but also the baby becomes the victim of inhuman practice of female circumcision. Alice Walker informs women about the prospective dangers of circumcision, and she condemns the practice of female genital mutilation in *Possessing the Secret of Joy* as Constance S. Richards emphasizes: "The voice Walker created is not, by the end of novel, an individual African woman's voice, but a collective voice in authentic solidarity" with African people against oppressive practices" (2000, p.145). Shortly, this patriarchal tradition of female circumcision affects women not only physically but also psychologically by leading them to a kind of suicide.

### Conclusion

Alice Walker in her novel entitled *Possessing the Secret of Joy* has attempted to improve a highly critical and sophisticated view to demonstrate unavoidable traditions which give harm both the body and the soul of African women. The content of the novel copes with a scandalous topic that limits the growth of young black girls much beyond human capacity. The author has endeavored to take target reading public's attention in this novel to the horrible application of female circumcision. As a matter of fact, Walker "strongly condemn[s] the practice of female genital mutilation" (Walley 1997, p.405) claiming that it is against the main human rights of women. Moreover, the misuse of African rainforest sources and its fatal results are clearly depicted throughout the novel. Based upon these issues, it can be claimed that Africans unknowing show complicity in their self-destructions with the so-called civilized Europe.

As a result, this novel shows that blind commitment to the orders of other powerful countries and primitive traditions prepare the end of a community. African people die together with the monkeys as they are affected by the blood remains of the animals. In this respect, it should always be kept in mind that for every damage given to the nature, it has a way of scourging the humanity in the same way in return. Nature as a blind judge takes its revenge and "we can't do as we wish without paying a price" (Evernden 1996, p.93). Alice Walker tries to warn the African people against the dangers of Western admiration. In addition to the devastation of forest, female circumcision gives unrepairable damage to African women. The message that Walker tries to transmit to the readers is that if you kill nature, you also kill yourself as in the case of Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* and no matter how primitive it is, a community should care the health of its women by prohibiting female genital mutilation if they want to sustain a healthy regeneration.

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