

CALLING FOR HUMANITY IN ALICE WALKER'S *POSSESSING THE SECRET OF JOY* AND TONI MORRISON'S *THE BLUEST EYE*

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Abstract

Alice Walker, a prominent African American female writer and the inventor of the term 'womanism' primarily focuses upon exploitation, marginalization and devaluation of the black women. The plight of the black women due to racial, class and gender discrimination becomes the central concern in all of her novels. She has successfully tried to showcase the talent of women in general and black women in particular in her mostly acclaimed novels Meridian(1976) as well as The Color Purple (1983). The objective of this paper is to show Walker's humanitarian principles observed in her controversial novel Possessing the Secret of Joy (1993). The paper particularly studies Walker's Possessing the Secret of Joy in order to depict her humanitarian concerns. Walker exposes the falsehood of the age old culture in Olinka tribe which cripples woman's natural instinct of receiving sexual pleasure by practicing female genital mutilation. Similarly Toni Morrison, the recipient of The Nobel Prize is another significant voice in the canon of African American literature. Her notable novels are The Bluest Eye, Sula, Beloved, The Song of Solomon. The Bluest Eye renders the theme of racism in America. The novel exposes the age old ideology of racism and its impact upon the black community. The objective of this paper is to explore the writers' similar venture towards calling for humanity in their respective novels.

Key Words: Humanity, male chauvinism, colonialism, female genital mutilation, gender exploitation etc.

Peterson & Seligman write, "Humanity is a virtue linked with basic ethics of altruism derived from the human condition. It also symbolises human love and compassion towards each other. Humanity differs from mere justice in that there is a level of altruism towards individuals included in humanity more so than the fairness found in justice." (34) The conflict between the two that is powerful and the powerless is always seen in the society. Black people in America were oppressed, humiliated and marginalized due to racism and class conflict. The condition of women was even more vulnerable. The African American

writers like Zora Neal Hurston, Ralph Elison, Richard Wright, Toni Morrison and Alice Walker have successfully documented the dilemma of racism, sexism and classism in their novels. The root cause behind the oppression of the black by the white people is lack of the humanitarian principles like love, empathy, equality, unity and brotherhood.

Walker's controversial novel *Possessing the Secret of Joy* is her brave attempt to oppose the uncivilized and unscientific age old tradition of female genital mutilation. Tashi, the protagonist of the novel, belongs to the Olinka tribe in Africa. The circumcision ceremony is nothing but 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 which diminishes them that they are only women inferior to men, that they even do not even have rights over their bodies." (213) Walker has used FGM as a tool to signify gender discrimination in the African American society. The novel is Walker's humanist agenda to make the people aware about humanity. The illustrated dictionary of literature writes about humanism : " a philosophy that places faith in the dignity of humankind and rejects the medieval perception of the individual as a weak and fallen creature.' Humanists' typically believe in the perfectibility of human nature and view reason and education as the means to that end."(84) The novel appeals to all to develop a humanist approach towards women and not to humiliate and oppress them under the name of culture. The novel is a cry for establishing humanitarian principles like equality and freedom

Tashi, the female protagonist and her sister Dura in *Possessing the Secret of Joy* are the victims of this age old tradition of female genital mutilation (FGM) which involves the partial or total removal of external female genitalia. Dura was just an adolescent child and was totally ignorant about the custom. She undergoes the custom with the consent of her family members. She dies due to the extra bleeding during the circumcision ceremony. The ceremony is obviously responsible for the death of Dura. But nobody in the village was aware of it. Even the family members were blindly following the custom of the Olinka tribe. Tashi cries over the death of her beloved sister but nobody cares. As the narrator writes : " They were always saying You must not cry!. These are new people coming to live among us. They'll think we beat you! Yes ,we understand your sister is dead ,but ... time now to put on a good face and make the foreigners welcome. if you can't behave ,we will have to ask your mother to take you elsewhere." (15) The lines clearly show the inhuman attitude of the villagers in Olinka towards a girl child and her sufferings. Though Tashi's sister is dead due to the extra bleeding the villagers are nothing to do with that. The people of the village have accepted this custom to restrain women's sexuality. One can see this FGM as a weapon of male patriarchy to kill female sexuality as well as her freedom. Males just want women to be their servants and to fulfill their sexual desire when they want. They don't want women to enjoy sexual

pleasure without them so FGM is purely a sexual politics against women. Alice Walker takes a strong stand against this sexual politics in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*.

Possessing the Secret of Joy Tashi too becomes a spokesperson of women. 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 honor and autonomy.” (149) Being a victim of the age-old tradition of FGM, she wants to raise her voice against this cruel and inhuman practice. Therefore, she makes a decision to kill M' Lissa, the circumciser. Her act is against the ill practice of FGM, which is destructive for the whole community of women. In this respect Tashi's attempt is for the better lot of the African American women in particular and women in general. As Gillespie writes about Tashi's act ; “as a kind of quest for autonomy and freedom “ (151) Tashi's life journey also exposes her quest for identity formation. She is seen disturbed from the beginning of the novel when her dear sister, Dura dies due to the extra bleeding during the circumcision ceremony. As she herself narrates : “I remembered my sister Dura's... my sister Dura's ...I could get no further .There was a boulder lodged in my throat.My heart surged pitifully.I knew what the boulder was ; that it was word;and that behind that word I would find my earliest emotions . Emotions that frightened me insane...” (78) Her sister Dura's death makes her aware of the evils of FGM. Earlier Tashi is seen as a follower of the tradition like others. She takes a decision to undergo circumcision in order to follow the codes and conducts of the community. It shows her faith as well as her responsibility towards the African culture, As Gillespie observes : “She decides to have the operation as sign of defiance against colonial oppressors and as a marker of solidarity with the customs and traditions of her people.” (148) She thinks positively about the FGM tradition. She considers it as a mark of their identity. It makes clear that from earlier in the novel Tashi is in search of her identity. As she says: “We had been stripped of everything but our black skins... these marks gave me courage. I wanted such a mark for myself. (23) But later she comes to know about the evil effects of FGM upon her body. She faces problems during her pregnancy because of the mutilation and as a result, she delivers a physically impaired baby. So Tashi becomes aggressive to take revenge against the practice of FGM which has destroyed her as well as her sister Dura's life. She thinks that killing M'Lissa will allow some release from her experiences. Her decision of killing M 'Lissa is a result of the understanding of her own body and her own self.

Walker in this novel makes a revolutionary attempt to stand against the age old custom of FGM in order to bring out change .She wants to establish a new kind of society which values humanitarian principles of equality and freedom. She wants to create a society, which does not differentiate men and women. As Gerri Bates rightly asserts: “Walker brings to this novel her characteristic political ethos of protest, resistance, and liberation, offering a sympathetic perspective while championing, in her view, a worthy cause to bring about change.” (116) At the end of the novel at the time of Tashi's execution her family members holds a banner RESISTENCE IS THE SECRET OF JOY! The line shows Tashi's lifelong

refusal to accept reality that was imposed upon her by the ill intentions of others. Meena Kumari too rightly comments about Tashi's act and the practice of FGM : “ 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.” (149)

Possessing the Secret of Joy shows the life journey of the female protagonist Tashi who is suffering on account of the inhuman and insensitive attitude of the society towards females. The society, particularly the Olinkan society in the novel is male dominated and wants to crush down female sexuality .While fulfilling this selfish purpose the male chauvinistic society forgets all ethics of humanity and practices FGM, a practice of female circumcision. The females like M' Lissa ,the circumciser, are insensitive towards her fellow women. In the novel M'Lissa is seen as an enemy to women who is a practitioner of FGM.The novel subtly portrays the evil effects of rigid customs like genital mutilation on the psyche of women. Tashi is physically as well as mentally tortured due to this custom. The death of Dura ,her sister made an everlasting impact upon her sensitive mind and she went into an unconscious state. The state where she just tries to remember her beloved sister. In the novel M Zee ,who represents Freud, cures Tashi. He stands for the humanitarian principle as well. Therefore, being aware of these customs Walker stands against it and tries to educate men as well as women. As Seema Murugan rightly observes: “Her novel may be considered as a pedagogical tool to educate women and girls, men and boys about the hazardous effects of genital mutilation, not simply on the health and happiness of individuals, but on the whole society which practises it.” (45) Thus, Walker's novel *Possessing the Secret of Joy* expose the ill effects of the age old custom of FGM and attacks on the falsehood of male patriarchy which limits women's individuality. The male patriarchy which sees women just for the sake of their sexual fulfillment damages women's potential. Therefore, the novel gives a strong humanistic voice to establish human values of compassion, equality and brotherhood. Walker's novel is very relevant today where one sees the lack of human values.

Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* has discussed exploitation, humiliation and marginalization of the blacks in general and black women in particular. The novel undoubtedly questions the survival of humans in the atmosphere of racism. Therefore, the novel stands for the universal principles of equality, unity and brotherhood.The male as well as the female characters in this novel face traumatic situations on the account of racism as well as classism. African American women face triple jeopardy of race ,gender and class.*The Bluest Eye* depicts the lives of the blacks in 1920s. K.Sumana asserts: “Constant racism forms a continuity in the cycle of frustration from which the town folk cannot easily escape. The hostile environment that surrounds the blacks makes them ‘helpless scapegoats of subservient acceptance of everything white.’”(76)

There are two families namely The Breedloves and the MacTeers.The Breedloves live in Lorain Ohio. The condition in which they live indicates the subordinate status of the blacks in the white dominated world.Cholly breedlove works in a coal mine and finds himself

unable to provide comfortable life to his family. His wife Pauline who follows the ways of the white country women spends more money to look beautiful. She has become a victim of racial ideology in America. As the narrator narrates: "Along with the idea of romantic love, she was introduced to another-physical beauty. Probably the most destructive ideas in the history of human thought." (95) On this account conflict arises in the relationship of Cholly and Pauline. They fight with each other. The domestic violence affects their daughter Pecola's life who feels insecure. Pecola as girl child is deprived of parent

The novel *The Bluest Eye* discusses many incidents which show Pecola's victimization on the account of her color. To mention but a few her encounter with the shopkeeper Yakobowsky who does not even pay any attention to her, the black boys at school harasses her calling about her father's habit of sleeping naked, Geraldine's son namely Junior too harasses Pecola when she goes to his home. Geraldine too exploits Pecola when she finds her in her home. All this humiliation and exploitation compels Pecola to yearn for the blue eyes. She assumes that if she gets the blue eyes all will treat her differently. This Pecola's inner calling for the blue eyes turns her into insanity. She goes to the Soap Head Church, a man who just deceives people on the name of religion. He wants to get rid off one dog. So when Pecola tells her the wish he takes undue advantage of her ignorance. He gives her food containing poison and asks her to give it to the dog he detests. He tells Pecola that if the dog does not react then her wish will not be fulfilled. But if it reacts then her wish will be granted. Pecola does the same. The dog dies after eating the poisonous food and Pecola, according to Soaphead Church's suggestion, considers that she has got the blue eyes. Pecola, a girl child who finds herself victimized under the pressure of racism, creates an imaginative friend and she starts talking to her. This is a complete psychological disorder of Pecola whose personality is disintegrated. Eventually Pecola as well as her baby dies which shows Pecola's futile existence in white dominated America.

Besides Pecola, her mother Pauline is also affected by the racial hegemony who starts working as a maid in one white Fisher family. The minute study of her characters shows some kind of psychological disorder in her personality. The definition says that the state of the mind where the individual causes stress to self or others. In the case of Pauline it is true. She is not able to provide warmth of love to her daughter Pecola. She behaves violently with her husband Cholly. On the contrary, she takes care of the children of her white employer. Even when Pecola tells about her rape by her father, Cholly Pauline does not believe which indicates disorder of her mind. She is a woman who has lost all her senses in the pursuit of the white standard of beauty. Later Pecola too follows her mother's footsteps and destroys her own self. As Gillespie observes Pecola's existence in the family and writes: "The two major deterministic forces in Pecola's young life are her mother and father, Cholly and Pauline Breedlove. Significantly, Pecola never calls either of her parents' mom or dad, demonstrating the psychological and emotional distance between the young girl and her parents." (52) Cholly too is humiliated on the account of racism by two white men when he

was making love to one country girl Darline. He felt completely helpless in that situation when the two white men humiliated him saying ,” Do it better” .This humiliation causes his psyche terribly and turns him into a rapist who rapes his daughter Pecola . His act of rape is a kind of psychological disorder in the sense that a father who is unable to understand the difference in love and sensual pleasure.

Thus, Pecola, Pauline and Cholly of *The Bluest Eye* face racial discrimination in American society and find themselves in a chaos. Tashi from Walker’s *Possessing the Secret of Joy* too finds herself trapped into the vicious cycle of ill custom like female genital mutilation which is a product of patriarchy. Both the writers have done an attempt to emphasise the principles of unity, equality and brotherhood. The writers highlight the importance of humanity to live a sustainable and peaceful life. If humans do not follow the humanitarian principles the people like Tashi, members in the Breedloves family namely Pecola, Pauline, Cholly will suffer till the end. The respective novels have documented the sad reality in the society and have done a notable attempt to stop the cycle of oppression.

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