

**GIVING VOICE TO THE VOICELESS: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF
ALICE WALKER'S *POSSESSING THE SECRET OF JOY* AND
SHASHI DESHPANDE'S *THE DARK HOLDS NO TERROR***

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Abstract

Alice Walker, the winner of the prestigious Pulitzer Prize for fiction is a significant voice in the literary tradition of African American literature. She discusses the dilemma of women in general and African American women in particular on the account of race, class and gender. Her ideology of womanism reflected in her prose 'In Search of My Mother's Garden' makes her a celebrated woman novelist who promotes liberation not only for women but also for the whole human community. Shashi Deshpande, winner of the prestigious Sahitya Academy Award is one of the most prominent female writers in the field of Indian writing in English. Both Walker and Deshpande are similar in their attempt to show the victimization of women on the account of the societal norms and customs in the respective society. The present paper investigates that how both of the writers have realistically portrayed the subordinate status of women on the account of male patriarchy. The paper studies Walker's **Possessing the Secret of Joy** and Deshpande's **The Dark Holds No Terror** with the view to expose gender marginalization as well as women's rising consciousness towards self-realization.

Keywords: female circumcision, sexism, marginalization, male patriarchy, social customs, etc.

Alice Walker, the inventor of the term ‘womanism’ and the writer of the most celebrated novel *The Color Purple* stands against the age old custom of female genital mutilation in her controversial novel *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. Her attempt in this novel is to oppose the uncivilized and unscientific age old tradition of female genital mutilation. Tashi; the female protagonist of the novel belongs to 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 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 brings the issue of FGM to the lime light and advocates the dilemma of the women in Olinka in particular and the other women in general. Walker gives voice to the voiceless in this novel.

Tashi, the female protagonist and her sister Dura in *Possessing the Secret of Joy* are the victims of this age old tradition of FGM. 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 about it. Even their mother Catherine supports the circumcision ceremony, which shows the evil impact of male dominated society upon the psyche of the females in Olinka. She blindly follows 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*.

In *Possessing the Secret of Joy* Tashi 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 takes 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 a follower of the tradition like others. She takes a decision to undergo the 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 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 this FGM 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 stand for women which belong to the powerless sections of the society. 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 Tashi who is suffered on the 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 everlasting impact upon her sensitive mind and she goes in 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 practices 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 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.

Similarly, Shashi Deshpande reveals the ugly reality in the lives of Indian women. She too like Walker gives voice to the voiceless. She exposes the hypocrisy of marriage which crippled women's lives throughout. Kusuma Kumari Writes : " Deshpande's novels are about women in self quest to posit the view that women in these novels have established themselves as autonomous beings, free from restrictions imposed by societal cultures, from their own fears and guilt that women have reached a stage of understanding the fundamental truth, 'You have to find Yourself'" (189) Sarita, the female protagonist of *The Dark Holds No Terrors* is similar to Walker's Tashi. She is deprived of parental care. Her family is a typical example of Indian male patriarchy which does not accept the existence of female child. Saru being a girl understands her mother's loving attitude towards her son Dhruv. On the contrary her mother neglects Saru. She says to her mother: You don't want me to have anything; you don't want me to do anything. You don't even want me to live (142) Saru has been oppressed by her family members which shows the cruelty of male patriarchy in Indian society. Deshpande has portrayed the feelings of a girl who is at the stage of puberty. Being a girl child Saru feels neglected and helpless. As she narrates: "I can remember closing my eyes and praying ...Oh, God, let it not happen to me. Just this once and no more. Let there be a miracle and let me be the one female to whom it doesn't happen." (62).

Saru's situation becomes more tragic after her brother Dhruv's death who drowned in a river. Her family members consider her responsible for Dhruv's death. Saru finds herself completely helpless. Saru's mother treats her badly after the incidence. The continuous humiliation by her mother makes Saru to develop hatred towards her mother. as Adesh Pal observes: "For Saru the very word "mother" stands for old traditions and rituals, for her mother sets up a bad model, which distorts her growth as a woman, as a Being... Thus, the strange childhood experiences up her inflated ego and her thirst for power over others." (74) Though Saru is humiliated at the hands of traditional norms and customs, she does not give up. She tries to find out an opportunity to do something in her life that stops her sufferings. She wants to pursue medical degree from Mumbai. She is opposed by her mother. Saru's mother does not understand the importance of girl's education who says: "But she's a girl...And don't forget, medicine or no medicine, doctor or no doctor, you still have to get her married, spend money on her wedding. Can you do both? (144)". Eventually, Saru goes to Bombay to study Medicine with the assistance of her father got a medical degree.

Since Saru does not get warmth of love and care she, being a woman sees her future with the man of her choice namely Manohar. Manohar is a man from lower caste whose relationship with Saru is not accepted by Saru's family.

Saru's mother says to her :

"What caste is he?
I don't know.
A Brahmin?
Of course not.

Then, cruelly...his father keeps a cycle shop.

Oh, so they are low-caste people, are they?"(98)

It shows Saru's mother's psyche towards the low caste people. It is an example of age-old prejudice in the mind of high caste about the lower caste people. Saru's attempt of starting a new life with the man of her choice turns into a disaster. She emerged as a successful doctor in the novel but the male chauvinistic attitude of the society affects the conjugal relationship of Saru and Manohar. Saru though is a successful doctor her status makes her husband feels inferior in front of her. Manohar becomes jealous of her wife's prestige in the society. It shows the narrow minded attitude of Indian males who don't accept their wives' status in the society. As Simone De Beauvoir observes, "Marriage is the destiny traditionally offered to women by society" (445) Saru is a victim of the age old ideology of marriage. Both Walker's Tashi and Deshpande's Saru are similarly humiliated and exploited on the account of gender. Their life is degraded on the account of falsehood of social norms. Tashi's husband though earlier gives positive impression in the novel later turns into an opportunistic like other males in general. When he finds that Tashi is no longer useful for him to fulfill his sexual needs he finds substitute in his French girl friend Lisette. The novel informs about their love affair and they have one child as well. On the other hand Deshpande's Saru is humiliated by her mother which indicates women's subordinate status in Indian society. Anyhow she tries to assert herself by pursuing a medical degree. Her decision of intercaste marriage creates problem for her. Even she leaves her parents behind in order to start a new life of freedom and peace of which she was deprived of since childhood. However her dream remains unfulfilled when her husband Manohar does not understand her. It is his male ego that destructs their marriage. The same thing is with Walker's Tashi. Her husband Adam develops interest in another lady finding her wife Tashi physically impaired due to circumcision. Both Deshpande's Saru and Walker's Tashi believe in love marriage. They have successfully did it too. But the poor attitude of the society and the males towards females has degenerated the existence of women in both of the novels. The age old patriarchy in the respective society does not accept women's existence. Saru feels that: "The human personality has an infinite capacity for growth, and so the esteem with which I was surrounded made me inches taller. But perhaps, the same thing that made me inches taller made him inches shorter. He had been the young man and I his bride. Now I was the lady doctor and he was my husband (42)" There was nothing wrong in Saru's profession as a doctor. When Manohar finds that she is honored in the society he feels inferior and this male ego Shashi Deshpande wants to highlight in the novel. As Dr Saryug Yadav writes: "Shashi Deshpande, meanwhile, shows how emancipation and success for a woman in the patriarchal Indian society can cause subversion of roles in the family and destroy happiness." (02) The novels is a superb attempt to condemn the age old patriarchy which kills women's potential. The custom which make the existence of women vulnerable and tragic. As Ms. Indumathi. S writes in the article 'Angst of an Alienated Soul in Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors*' : "The Dark Holds No Terror, portrays difficult endeavors of Sarita, the protagonist. It visualizes the struggle of a woman's survival and quest of her place in the world which never shows an easy path to walk."(02) The novel shows Saru's attempt to face the tragedy in her life. A woman whose existence is denied by her parents as well as her husband tries to stand at last. The title of the novel is very symbolic which indicates Saru's continuous sufferings. Saru's life is in darkness and she has got that much courage to face the sufferings in her life. It does not hold any terror in her mind. Tashi too stands erect in front of the male tyranny

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and kills the female circumciser M' Lissa. Her act symbolizes the fighting spirit in women who believe in women's autonomous self.

Thus Walker and Deshpande have done a wonderful attempt in *Possessing the Secret of Joy* and *The Dark Hold No Terror* respectively. They talk about humiliation, exploitation and marginalization of women in the respective society on the account of rigidity of social laws. The novels are the significant documents today which attempt to give voice to the voiceless and promote moral values of equality, unity and brotherhood.

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