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**Search for Identity in
Alice Walker's *Possessing the Secret of Joy***

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ABSTRACT: The term "identity" refers to the capacity for self-reflection and the awareness of self. 'Self-identity' refers to the global of a person who has within themselves. Writers like Toni Morrison, Doris Lessing and Langston Hughes have written about identity in their works. Alice walker deals with various kind of themes such as identity, mortality, spirituality, isolation, women empowerment, universalism, cultural imperialism, race and gender. Alice Walker is one of the leading novelists in Afro-American literature. In her novels, she portrays the Afro-Americans traumatic experience with slavery which aroused another battle with identity. *Possessing the Secret of Joy* highlights the problems of black women in their day-to-day life and details the scenario which leads them to self-discovery to overcome their disillusionment and recognize their own self. This present paper examines self-identity as their central theme, from slavery to the Civil Right movement era. It focusses on the theme of women empowerment and the search for identity of the main character who narrates her journey towards self-discovery in a white dominant world. Through her journey, Tashi suffers a lot. She wants to move on that life and hope to have her freedom and identity.

The following abbreviation is used after the quotation:

PSJ-*Possessing the Secret of Joy*

Many Afro-American writers deal with the issue of identity. It is either to succumb for the dominant power or to embrace their blackness. Many theorists and novelists have depicted the psychological impacts of suppressed black people. Toni Morrison, Doris Lessing and Langston Hughes talk about female oppression in their novels. Writers expose female oppression in all the genres of literature. Alice Walker is prominent who is obsessed with the sufferings of male and female simultaneously in her novels. The dominant theme in *Possessing the Secret of Joy* is the self-identity.

Possessing the Secret of Joy portrays the protagonist Tashi's life. Characters in the novel are in search of their own identity. The title of the novel informs the reader about Tashi's process of individuality. In this process, Walker explains the emotional relationship between individual and their family as well as their society. The situations of women are the worst one because they are doubly colonized – race and gender. They are subjugated by the whites and their own men at the same time. Tashi believes in Olinkan rituals after the death of her beloved sister, Dura. She loses her faith on the ritual called female genital circumcision. She wants peace and meaning of life. She reflects her concern with the black woman's struggle for spiritual and political survival. Black women in America lead a discriminated life and black female self are

denied not only by white men but also by their own people, particularly by black men. She gives details of the scenario which leads them to self-discovery to overcome their disillusionment and recognize their own self.

Alice Walker has published her *Possessing the Secret of Joy* in 1992. Tashi, the protagonist of the novel is portrayed as small Olinkan child crying as her younger sister, Dura dies of circumcision which is a process of female genital cutting prevailed in Olinka tribe. The Female Genital Mutilation is the main issue of the novel. Female genital mutilation is referred to as female circumcision or Clitoridectomy which is a religious ritual in Africa. Tashi's journey from her childhood to her death is the subject of the novel. Women in Africa are totally devoted to the tribal ceremonies, traditions and rituals. Walker has strongly attacked the blind following and devotion of women to their tribal identities through Tashi. Walker protests the rituals of Africans. She is committed to fight for the community which is socially oppressed. The characters in the novel present their culture and their acts of black community. Women, in several communities have a cultural importance. African women strongly believe their rituals. The traditions which they follow pass from generation to generation in which women play an important role. The African oral tradition is a medium to pass on the cultural heritage. The process of sacrificing themselves is one of the cultural practices of Olinka. Tashi gets her face marked with tribal markings which is indicative of Olinkan culture. It is crystal clear that the scarification maintains a social identity of the women in their Olinkan community. It is also practiced to maintain the honour of the African family.

In Olinkan community, it is also related to the process of virginity. When Tashi meets Adam at a young age, they become lovers. Adam wants to marry Tashi. Adam wants to bring her to America. Due to the death of Tashi's younger sister, Dura, her mother converts to Christianity and saves Tashi from the procedure. Tashi is appealed by her tribal leaders to maintain their tradition. "To be accepted as real women by the Olinka people; to stop the jeering. Otherwise I was a thing". (PSJ 120) She takes this decision to make her people feel proud of her and to show her solidarity to Olinka tradition. She has scars on her face as an African identity. This is the tactic the tribal authority utilizes to stop women becoming independent. M'Lissa, recognised as Tsunga performs both the processes of Tashi's and her sister Dura's FGM.

These FGM are painful and horrible experiences. Tashi thinks that they are the only things that the whites cannot erase from the African lives. She justifies her behaviour by saying, "We had been stripped of everything but our black skins. Here and there a defiant cheek bore the marks of our withered tribe. These marks gave me courage. I wanted such a mark for myself." (PSJ 139) She has a great respect for her people as a woman character. Her act to the Olinka tradition destroys her sexuality and femininity. To connect herself to her tribe and to maintain the tradition, Tashi undergoes the circumcision ritual. This ritual totally alters Tashi's existence and she is mentally disturbed. Tashi reflects cultural bonding and goes to carve the scars as tribal marks on her face. She supposes that this scarification would make her identity as a member of Olinka community and culture. But she loses her self-identity. Alice Walker has presented these cultural aspects in *Possessing the Secret of Joy* by creating a word picture of the Olinka community.

Adam, Celie's son goes to Africa and marries Tashi and brings her to America. She fails to satisfy Adam, her husband sexually. So, she feels guilty and disgusted. She expresses her

grief and helplessness as, “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.” (PSJ 59) After the depression, she wants to know why she has undergone circumcision. She goes to Switzerland, where she meets Carl Jung namely called Mzee. He is an old man, psychotherapist and uncovers her repressed childhood memories. Her journey takes her to America where she gives birth to a mentally challenged child, Benny. The relationship between the mother and the child remain always strained. She aborts her second child because she does not want to bear the pains of a caesarean delivery. All these sufferings are the results of her circumcision. Tashi recalls her sister, Dura’s death due to ancient inhuman practice of sexual binding.

As she fails at all the levels of life, she suffers from some dreams and psychological problems. She is taken to Raye, an African American female analyst for the further treatment. Raye helps Tashi to see herself completely. She is taken to a Jungian analyst, Mzee also. With the help of Mzee, Ray and Olivia, she learns that M’Lissa, an Olinka circumciser, called as Tsunga, is responsible for her plight and her sister, Dura’s death. Tashi and Dura are presented by Alice Walker as the victims of Olinkan tribal ritual. She decides to kill M’Lissa to save several girls from circumcision in future. She meets her and listens from her the stories about the traditional or cultural ideas of Olinka community and duties of a Tsunga. She meets M’Lissa, the Tsunga and spends time with her to learn her story. She learns from her that women are the leaders of their tribes and heads of the families in the past.

The structure of society is changed by men for their superiority and men become the heads of household. Some of the women become circumcisers and M’Lissa is one of them. She undergoes the process of circumcision in her childhood and experiences the pains of it. “M’Lissa continues to inflict the same pain on hundreds of young girls because the male leaders of the tribe demanded it.” (PSJ 196) Tashi learns that this practice is nothing but only a torture against the girls. She decides to oppose this practice and save all girl victims of the future. M’Lissa also accepts that the circumcision practice is against her will, but she has to observe it under the pressure of tradition. She states, “I have been strong ... strong and brave ... In service to tradition, to what makes us a people. In service to the country and what makes us who we are. But who are we, but torturers of children?” (PSJ 264) Tashi feels angry by the views of M’Lissa. She thinks that these Tsunga can be controlled by the elders of the society as they have dominating power. She thinks that they should be killed because they are witches.

Tashi revolts against the Olinkan traditions. She attacks M’Lissa, kills her and sets her house on fire. For this crime, Tashi is sent to jail by the Olinkan government. This act of Tashi is courageous and daring that is indicative of her womanist behavior. There is an aim behind the murder of M’Lissa by Tashi that other innocent girls should not be circumcised any more. Though she struggles for her own identity as a womanist character, she cannot survive. Tashi prepares herself to struggle for self and fight against the exploitation of women. But her struggle becomes an initiation of the revolt against female genital cutting all over the world. This act of Tashi is for survival and wholeness. She gives a lesson to all girls and women that “RESISTANCE IS THE SECRET OF JOY!” (PSJ 291). The last sentence of the novel is “There is roar as if the world cracked open and I flew inside. I am no more. And satisfied” (PSJ 281) This sentence really ties the theme of surviving through hardships and fights against the terrible world for their identity. Tashi finds the secret of joy in this final moment, she finally satisfies with her life. According to Walker, “Torture is not culture”. Tashi’s struggle is

successful as she creates awareness about the rights of women among several women and girls those have gathered at the moment of execution and she dies with satisfaction.

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