

---

## Female Genital Mutilation as Cultural Practice in Alice Walker's *Possessing the Secret of Joy*

<sup>1</sup>P. Vikaash, <sup>2</sup>Dr. R. Kavitha

<sup>1</sup>M.A., Part – Time Ph.D. Research Scholar,  
PG & Research Centre of English,

G.T.N. Arts College (Autonomous), Dindigul, Tamilnadu, India – 624 005.

<sup>2</sup>M.A., M.Phil., M.Ed., DGT., Ph.D.,

Head & Associate Professor of English,

PG & Research Centre of English,

G.T.N. Arts College (Autonomous), Dindigul, Tamilnadu, India – 624 005.

### Abstract

Language shows identities in three ways: first, through the categories and labels that people use to show their belongingness; second, through the indexed ways of speaking and acting that people use to show their belongingness; and third, through the interpretations that others make of those indices. Part of shared culture is being able to see and understand the indexes. Everyone has a set of identities that includes national, ethnic, religious, generational and gender identities, as well as socioeconomic class, sexual orientation, profession and different levels of belonging to groups that are below and above the nation. The novel *Possessing the Secret of Joy* looks at how personal experiences and the long-term repercussions of colonialism are connected. It looks at how cultural practices are changed by outside forces and how they change them.

**Key words:** Cultural identity, gender identity, sexuality, Afro-American, Supremacy

---

### Introduction

Cultural identities seldom possess significant imaginative potency unless they are articulated as national or racial/ethnic identities. Individuals do not engage in warfare for their culture as they voluntarily sacrifice themselves for their homeland, their people, or other “imagined communities” that they regard as inherently formed rather than as arbitrary, contingent cultural creations. It is not demonstrable that any race or nation constitutes a “natural” entity; all are, to some extent, created. Concurrently, as Mary Catherine Bateson has noted: “Everything is natural.” It may appear like gender identities are directly related to the way reproductive organs are shaped, but people are more likely to believe that someone is a “woman trapped in a man’s body” or the other way around than that someone is a Japanese person trapped in an Ethiopian’s body.

The quest for cultural identity has been a persistent motif in post-colonial literature, illustrating the difficulties encountered by people and communities in reconciling their identities amidst historical disruptions, colonial inheritances and global transformations. Alice, a well-known author, shows this in his novel by looking at how people and groups have travelled across history, geography and culture. His works go beyond the usual limits of genre and story, giving detailed pictures of broken identities, living together in a multicultural way and how history is related. This paper concentrates on Alice Walker’s *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. This study investigates the portrayal of cultural identity influenced by historical upheavals, migration movements and personal adversities. Alice’s narratives are richly layered, incorporating themes of belonging, memory and resistance and serve as a mirror to the socio-cultural realities of post-colonial societies. The quest for cultural identity is among the most captivating and complex themes in literature.



### Objectives

1. To find the common themes of identity, memory and migration in Alice Walker's novel *Possessing the Secret of Joy*.
2. To assess Alice's narrative strategies in confronting cultural dislocation and hybridity.
3. To examine the socio-cultural and historical conditions that shape the identities of the characters in Alice Walker's *Possessing the Secret of Joy*.

### Hypothesis

Alice Walker's novel *Possessing the Secret of Joy* depicts the quest for cultural identity as a complicated, multifaceted process shaped by historical events, migration and globalization, illustrating the persistence and flexibility of human cultures.

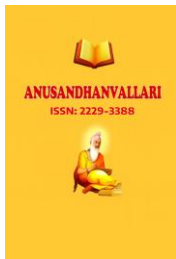
### Discussion

The history of Afro-Americans goes four hundred years back when the first Americans arrived in James Town, Virginia in 1619 to work as indentured servants for white people. At first, Americans could lawfully grow crops and rear animals to buy their freedom. The idea of a "slave race" didn't come around until the 1700s.

Alice Walker is a part of this tradition. They don't show black women as conventional black women; instead, they show them as important members of their community. As a female author, she illustrates how self-alienation results in a distortion of reality. The impossible urge to fit in with the ideals and standards of white middle-class society and to learn what it means to be attractive, happy and deserving in white society. It is demonstrated to be stressful and debilitating. She brings a distinct depth of black experience to her novels that sets her apart as a writer. Like any great artist, Alice Walker's literature is very varied and complicated. It appears to address nearly every aspect and dimension of existence. Her efforts to examine the multifaceted aspects of Black life without any indication of concealing or glossing over any of them distinguishes her fiction from that of many other authors, especially those who have focused solely on the theme of Black oppression by Whites. She has actually held Black people to a very high standard of criticism" in doing so. She has had her readers think about all the attitudes, customs and structures that have kept them caught in a cycle of suffering and degradation, along with racist oppression. A thorough examination of Walker's novel will provide a more comprehensive perspective, dismantling misconceptions and revealing the truth, both in the humiliation and the exaltation of the Black 'Womanist' experience.

In *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, Walker writes about powerful people. Tashi suffers to fit in with the society they live in. In order to fit in with her tribe and feel whole, Tashi, the main character in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, willingly goes through the tribal practice of genital mutilation. Tashi thinks that the surgery she has done to herself connected her to these women, who she sees as strong and invincible. "Olinka...seemed Terribly bold, terribly revolutionary and free" (63).

Tashi always wants to hurt herself to show respect for her culture and feels truly Olinkan. She thinks she has acted in a true revolutionary manner. But later on, she realizes that this treatment has left her with scars on her body and mind. She has a hard time finding her genuine self since she is in war with herself. Tashi, on the other hand, knows that it might be hard for her and her generation to be fully free, but the fight must go on for the daughters and granddaughters. She says: "I could never look that confident... Of pride. Of peace. We can't have it because we can never pretend to be self-possessed. But maybe your daughter..." (273). She is full of energy because she hopes for brighter times ahead. With the support of her therapists, Mzee and Raye and other family members, she gets stronger over time and is able to handle all of her challenges. She is free and awake now and she is not afraid of death or punishment. Before she died, she said: "I'm not afraid of dying. This government has killed so many people in this place that they will kill me there. I will not wear a blindfold so that I may see far in



all directions. I will focus on the beauty of one blue hill in the distance and that moment will be eternity for me” (276-77).

In *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, Tashi articulates this perspective by asserting that if one does not confront the harsh reality presently, Africa may well be depopulated of black people and the worldwide suffering of our children will continue to be our curse. Similarly, the danger of putting all the blame on somebody else for the mess you make out of your life, emerging as one of Walker’s “soul survivors.” Walker’s novels collectively provide a chronicle of black history, notwithstanding the distortions of cultural heritage built from myths, stereotypes and imagery. Walker is trying to bring the community back together by giving them ways to go from being dehumanized to being humanized and from being depersonalized to having a strong, clear identity. Bolla Madhavi and Konda Nageshwara Rao observe: “Alice Walker’s novel *Possessing the Secret of Joy* offers a powerful exploration of the cultural practice of female genital mutilation (FGM) and its impact on women’s lives. The novel tells the story of Tashi, a woman who undergoes FGM as a young girl and struggles with the physical, emotional, and psychological consequences of the practice. Through Tashi’s story, the novel raises important questions about the relationship between tradition and individual freedom and offers a powerful critique of the practice of FGM” (A49).

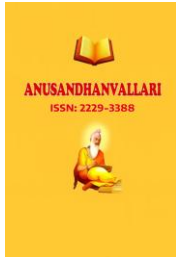
The author has shown the black community in her novel *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, People of color, especially women, are more enthusiastic and have a more positive attitude about life now that they are more aware of themselves. Alice Walker’s literature has elements of both womanism and humanism. She firmly thinks that women of color possess the ability to create and nurture just like any other individual. But in a lot of cases, it seems like their identity and life are at a crossroads. Not only has she tried to characterize these crossroads, but she has also tried to give them direction by raising the awareness of a huge part of her community, many of whom are still victims of oppression and cross-cultural myths and traditions, either directly or indirectly.

When the focus switches to a deeper and more meaningful look at the African roots, we can get a better picture of the black community’s plight. Her novel “*Possessing the Secret of Joy*” is set in tribal Africa and deals with the issue of sexuality in a very strong way. The Olinkans engage in ceremonies aimed at the mutilation of sexuality, whereas the Mundos focus on female sexuality as a celebration of life. Walker has used these two novels to show how denying sexuality may cause a woman to lose her original self, while celebrating her whole self, sexuality included, can make her feel pure and happy. Walker thinks of the Mundo society as a perfect, moral society. They not only accept democratic concepts, but they also live them out to the utmost because they don’t have any complicated rituals or social hierarchies. She is sad that women in Africa have also been abused and crucified every day in various parts of the world. Through Tashi, she articulates the necessity of a return to the distant past when the early African woman, the progenitor of womankind, was ‘notoriously free.’

Walker has not only shown the black woman as a sexual victim but also of white supremacy and African cultural tradition. The African American woman’s status in her home country and see her move to America is a descent into hell. Walker has shown how female circumcision and other African folk traditions that have made it hard for women to move, take away their sexual pleasure and often left them unable to function. Walker has tried to bring attention to these problems in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. She wants to free black women from the shame of following cultural practices that are bad for their health and progress.

Walker believes that spiritual growth is necessary for racial growth. This is what her novels say. When her characters start to understand the subtleties of spirituality, they also get more energized, which brings about a resurrection of serenity and purity, which is the only thing needed for a wholesome life. Walker seems to agree with Frances Harper when she says: “Our greatest need is not more wealth and learning, but religion full of life and glowing with love. Let this be the driving force in the race and it will inevitably elevate the state of character and tradition” (260).

Walker’s novel has been a really rewarding and eye-opening experience. The passion with which Walker writes and the power of her work leave an impact by going under the skin of both readers and critics, making them



pay more attention. The study cannot conclude at this juncture; the researcher is compelled to conduct an additional examination of Alice Walker's oeuvre and to collaborate with her in a movement that amplifies the voices of the marginalized, thereby 'overcoming speechlessness' so that, in the foreseeable future, the 'caged bird will sing' with unrestrained clarity.

### Conclusion

Alice Walker has a forward-thinking vision and works to help others learn how to avoid being dominated in order to recognize what makes each person special. So, her writing is meant to make people more aware of and caring about other people. Her essay encourages people to work together to make the world a better place by being really determined. All aspects of black identity have been examined and defined.

### Works Cited

- [1] Walker, Alice. *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, Harcourt, 1992.
- [2] Harper, Frances Ellen Watkins. *Iola Leroy*. Beacon Press, 1987.
- [3] Konda, K. Nageshwar Rao. "Walker's *Possessing the Secret of Joy*." *International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts*. 2023.
- [4] Bateson, Mary Catherine. On the naturalness of things. In John Brockman & Katinka Matson (eds.), *How things are: A science tool-kit for the mind*, 9–16. William Morrow & Co. 1995.
- [5] Singh NM (2013) The affective labor of growing forests and the becoming of environmental subjects: rethinking environmentality in Odisha, India. *Geoforum* 47: 189–198