



Article Type: Original Research

Page Numbers: 95-112

Received: 01 February 2023

Accepted: 15 February 2024

Published: 02 April 2024

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.22034/cls.2024.63170>

Author Details:

1. Ph.D. in English Literature,
Central Tehran Branch, Islamic
Azad University, Tehran, Iran

daneshvari_m@yahoo.com

2. Associate Professor of English
Literature, Department of English
Language and Literature,
Kurdistan University, Sanandaj,
Iran. (Corresponding Author)

b.sajadi@uok.ac.ir

The Personal Becomes the Political: Womanist Resilience and Butlerian Agency in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*

Meimanat Daneshvari¹; Bakhtiar Sadjadi^{2*}

Abstract: The present paper explores Alice Walker's *Possessing the Secret of Joy* in an attempt to highlight the importance of the establishment of a well-defined identity as the crucial step in the life of Tashi, a victim of genital mutilation. She becomes whole and healthy once she finds a voice and remakes her severed ties with the black community. Her individual acts of rebellion are complemented with collective political action against genital mutilation. Butler's view, agency is a restorative energy which works against fragmentation and opens a new possibility for psychic healing as the essential path to the formation of an individual identity. The paper explores the path taken by the novel's female protagonist to validate her right as an active agent and defy the objectifying assumptions which deprive women of the right to be treated as human subjects. The long-held womanist aspirations shared by Tashi and her fellow sufferers matched by the desire to restore the lost agency is the only hope given to black women to establish their own voice. The protagonist's final healing is thus achieved through the healthy interaction between individual as well as collective acts of rebellion: individual agency accompanied by political and social transformation.

Keywords: Agency; Fragmentation; Wholeness; Identity Reformation; Womanism.

Citation: Meymanat Daneshvari; Bakhtiar Sadjadi. "The Personal Becomes the Political: Womanist Resilience and Butlerian Agency in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*". *Critical Literary Studies*, 6, 2, 2024, -. doi: 10.22034/cls.2024.63170

1. Introduction

The transformative energy experienced by those black women who have achieved a degree of autonomy by breaking the hegemonic molds of patriarchy and racial objectification has always been the central concern of most female black authors. Alice Walker, as one of the major twentieth century African-American writers, has scrutinized the life of female protagonists who have passed over their traumatic experiences through the establishment of a well-defined identity. The publication of Alice Walker's 1983 essay collection, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, was hailed worldwide as her womanist gospel. It was a response to white feminism which was exclusively concerned with white, middle-class female issues and ignores race and class as marginal and irrelevant. Womanism was acknowledged as the hallmark in Walker's writing, celebrating African American culture and black women's everyday experiences. The exploration of the intricacies of black women's lives, their final emergence as triumphant agents and the establishment of a semi-egalitarian society draws the line between Walker's works and the writings of her feminist co-warriors.

Womanist consciousness is one of the core themes chosen by black women writers to illustrate the dramatic change from oppressed to self-defined individuals. This is an essential journey experienced by those black women who have achieved a degree of autonomy by breaking the hegemonic molds of patriarchy as well as racial objectification. This transformative journey is both personal and public and is completed through the formation of complex relationships with other women, men, and the black community in general in an attempt to achieve a more meaningful, deep self-definition. What differentiates a womanist bonding from the current feminist paradigm is its reliance on respect, mutuality, hospitality, unconditional love and collective action. In bell hooks' view: "This extended kin network affirms the primacy of a revitalized spirituality, in which everything that exists is informed by godliness, in which love as a force that affirms connection and intersubjective communion makes an erotic metaphysic possible." (qtd. Gates, 294) What permeates womanism is the establishment of an empowered individual consciousness which is the stepping stone for the collective empowerment of black women. Personal agency is achieved through the marriage of the personal and the political. It begins with love, self-respect and self-sufficiency and generates the energy for social and political change.

Alice Walker's bulk of writing is mostly characterized by the initiatory journeys taken by the characters to transcend the racial, social and patriarchal boundaries. Her

1992 novel, *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, is her fifth novel in a set of seven consecutive novels. It does not come after *The Color Purple*, though, thematically speaking, it is the conceptual extension of that novel. Tashi, the young Olinkan girl who first appeared in *The Color Purple*, continues her adventures and tries to come to terms with her traumatic experiences in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. Tashi, renamed Evelyne Jonson in America, is the protagonist of the novel. To maintain her tribal legacy and assert her solidarity with Olinkan women, she volunteers to jeopardize her life by scaring her face and willingly undergoing the female initiation ceremony: genital mutilation. This ritual procedure was demanded by the male-dominated community of Olinka to guarantee the tribal sanity. Tashi, in her struggle to keep the tradition intact, alters her own existence and female identity; she was changed to a fragmented, mentally disturbed woman who was not able to live a normal life. To put the broken pieces of her identity together, she traveled to Switzerland to meet Mzee- an old psychiatrist reminiscent of Carl Jung.

The present paper provides an illustration of the physical and mental trauma imposed on Tashi- as a representative woman-to solidify male hierarchy and her revolt against the repressive forces to retrieve her honor and true identity. Her revolt and the establishment of her agency is at a higher, more political level compared to Celie (the female protagonist in *The Color Purple*). She is another genuine womanist, who not only broke the walls of subjugation through self-enlightenment, but also achieves social and political agency through taking the life of M'Lissa, the old tsunga (an old woman who performs the initiation ceremony and was respected as a monumental saint): a true courageous, willful act on the part of a mutilated woman. The central purpose in this study is to scrutinize the path taken by Tashi, as the representative of all marginalized women, to subvert the long-held sexual and racial dogmas through her individual will and active collaboration of all the other fellow sufferers. Thus, Tashi's final transformation is achieved at both personal and political levels. This careful character analysis is focused on two major liberating strategies of 'womanism' and 'agency' proposed by Alice Walker and Judith Butler respectively. The researcher shall first present the literature review section which includes a vivid account of major studies conducted so far on womanism, black feminism, and the selected novel. The next section of the study, the theoretical framework, is dedicated to a close scrutiny of the major critical concept: womanism and agency, employed by Alice Walker and Judith Butler respectively, to analyze Walker's approach to black identity formation in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. Next, the novel under consideration is read in terms of the theoretical concepts. The results of the study will be elaborated in the conclusion section.

2. Literature Review

One of the most comprehensive books which anthologizes major works of womanist scholarship is authored by Layli Phillips. In *The Womanist Reader* (2006), Phillips illuminates its theoretical history and interdisciplinary nature. She investigates the underlying features of womanism, its method of social transformation and its relationship to other perspectives which blurs the theoretical lines of demarcation. She defines the term in the introduction to her book in this way: “Womanism is a social change perspective rooted in black women’s and other women of color’s everyday experiences and everyday methods of problem solving in everyday spaces ... restoring the balance between people and the environment, and reconciling human life with the spiritual dimension” (Phillips, xx). Phillips’ seminal book provides the reader with an in-depth practical analysis of womanism in different disciplines: from theology, literature, criticism, history, communication, film studies and psychology to anthropology and urban studies.

Patricia Hill Collins’ *Black Feminist Thought* (2000) is a scholarly attempt to set a standard for evaluating black women’s experiences and ideas. She has tried to capture the interconnectedness of race, gender and social class in Black women’s lives. Collins specifies the distinguishing features of black feminist thought thus: the recognition of the connection between black women’s consciousness and their everyday life experiences, the legacy of struggle, reconstruction of the derogated images of black women imposed by the white system, sexuality, resistance and the desire for self- definition. This book covers the works of such prominent black feminist thinkers as Angela Davis, bell hooks, Alice Walker and Audre Lorde and provides the first synthetic analysis of black feminist thought.

Gloria Watkins, who is now famous as bell hooks, is one of the black scholars who has carefully examined the core issues of racism and the urgent need for the introduction of a new visionary movement to end violence. In *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (1984), she scrutinizes the issues of sexual politics and offers a kind of feminism rooted in solidarity, integrity and compassion. True feminism in bell hooks’ view is: “a struggle to eradicate the ideology of domination that permeates Western culture on various levels, as well as a commitment to recognizing society so that the self-development of people can take precedence over imperialism, economic expansion, and material desires” (26). Such a stance is both personal and political: individual experience is as important as collective well-being. *Ain’t I a Woman* (1981) another groundbreaking book written by

bell hooks, examines the impact of black male sexism and white racism on the devaluation of black womanhood. She presents a thrilling picture of the mass brutalization and victimization of black women through sexual assault, sadistic flogging, forced breeding and idealization of white womanhood. Hooks explores the dynamics of sexist and racist oppression during slavery and moves beyond the institutionalized racial and sexual assumptions. Her main concern is to remap the dominant feminist theory through an inclusive commitment to eradicate all forms of oppression and to recognize a society where the desire for collective change overrules the fulfillment of individual aspirations.

The first full-length biography of Alice Walker, *Alice Walker: A life* (2004), authored by Evelyne C. White, traces the roots of the novelist's probing spirit. It presents an in-depth story of Walker's life and formative experiences and elaborates on the process of her intellectual and literary maturation. The author's main achievement is her concern about Walker's personal stories along with their historical context. Walker's life is almost as revealing as her novels, and White's book is the chronicle of a large life.

In the introduction to *Gifts of Virtue: Alice Walker and Womanist Ethics* (2010), Melanie L. Harris traces the development of womanist theology, proposed by such scholars as Katie Canon and Delores S. Williams, which was firmly grounded on Alice Walker's works and theories. Through a womanist intersectional analysis, they have highlighted the complex subjectivity of black women and advocated their theological and ethical perspectives. In her view, walker's womanism radically counteracts the former dehumanizing experiences of black people by establishing a new set of values: accountability, mutual relationship, communal sufficiency, resourcefulness and self-reliance. *To Live Fully, Here and There: The Healing Vision in the Works of Alice Walker* (2007), authored by Karla Simcikova, is the other groundbreaking book which presents a comprehensive understanding of Alice Walker's concept of spirituality which goes beyond the womanist model. This spiritual wisdom refers to Walker's way of seeing and participating in the world which is particularly drawn from her interest in Native American spirituality. As clearly noted by Simcikova: "The only path to wholeness is the way of mutual respect and peaceful co-existence, the way of reciprocity that is deeply spiritual because the knowing comes from the soul" (21). She believes that, as human beings, we are part of an interconnected web of existence. We must restore our primary connection to the Sacred Earth, in order to experience wholeness. This egalitarian co-existence with the planet is sometimes referred to as eco-spirituality.

Maria Lauret also traces the themes of exploitation and abuse in her book, *Alice Walker* (2011). She presents a detailed analysis of Walker's seven major novels and clarifies her gradual intellectual development and her quest for self-definition with an eye to African-American legacy. Lauret's book is by far one of the most valid critical sources on Walker which has covered all the seven novels authored by Alice Walker from *The Color Purple* and *Possessing the Secret of Joy* to *Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart*. Harold Bloom's critical book on Walker's major works, *Alice Walker* (2007), is also a comprehensive collection of the selected essays on Walker's major works including *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. He traces the author's quest for love and personal values and the formation of her redemptive art in her major novels, short stories and non-fiction. Bloom's own introduction clearly states his concern with illustrating Walker's idiosyncratic style of writing- greatly influenced by her acknowledged precursor, Zora Neale Hurston- as a representative writer of black history and our current era.

As the second, since the basic theoretical core of the present study is based on Judith Butler's concept of agency, a careful analysis of her seminal book, *Gender Trouble* (1990), is indispensable. She first clarifies the notion of gender which has always been a controversial issue. In Butler's view, gender is a series of acts, a construction. Defined thus, gender can "never be fully internalized" (Butler, 141), and this opens the way for new possibilities. In Butler's view: "The abiding gendered self ... seeks to approximate the ideal of a substantial ground of identity, but which, in their occasional discontinuity reveal the temporal and contingent groundlessness of this ground." (Ibid, 141) The notion of agency and subversive resistance is dealt with critically here and a genealogical survey is made by Butler to investigate the conditions of the subject's emergence within discourse. She asserts that identities are by no means straight or singular and may subversively work to reveal the unstable nature of all identities.

The second book which provides a detailed study of Judith Butler's critical concepts is *Judith Butler: A Reader* (2002) authored by Sara Salih. She has made a thorough investigation on Butler's books, articles and interviews to trace her philosophical and intellectual career. This book covers the key concepts in Butler's theory: the subject, sex, gender, language and the psyche. The second part is a detailed critique of Butler which presents conflicting views about her.

3. Theoretical Framework

A recurrent struggle in the development of Afro-American women's fiction has always been to expand the range of female voice and present the true black female self.

Previously dismissed as second-class and non-academic, they have received significant critical acclaim in the last decades. Black women writers are the products of a particular historical context characterized by oppression; naturally, their focus has been on the portrayal of protagonists who are able to discover their inherent autonomy and assert, if not achieve, their potential. African-Americans have occupied a privileged place in the long history of this struggle. Many black authors, especially, have taken part in the long-held struggle for self-assertion and empowerment and there is a universal call for black women to break the silence. As black history and culture is characterized by dualities, paradoxes and versatility, there is no definite way to survive and assert one's identity. A dialogic discourse is thus central to mobilize black people and satiate the collective yearning for self-actualization.

The present study seeks to address Alice Walker's 1992 novel, *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, and will focus first on Walker's womanism and the healing vision she has offered and second, the achievement of self-autonomy and agency by Tashi, the female protagonist of the novel. The approach and methodology are based on the critical concepts developed by Alice Walker and Judith Butler to clarify the process taken by the major characters in the novel to subvert the hierarchical and sexual hegemonies of their time and come to voice in their integrative struggle.

3.1. Alice Walker's Womanism

Alice Walker coined the term 'womanism' in her 1983 essay collection *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*. According to her definition, womanism is "a word that said more than that they choose women over men. More than that they choose to live separate from men" (Walker, 81). She further elaborates the terms with reference to black cultural values, and argues that "it would have to be a word that affirmed connectedness to the entire community and the world, rather than separation, regardless of who worked and slept with whom (Walker, 81). The term was soon taken by other scholars outside the literary discourse which proves the productivity and fluidity of womanism beyond academy. It is a culturally-oriented perspective that seeks to reconcile differences-not negating or transcending them- and stop violence in whatever form. In its decentralizing manner, it invites everyone to have a taste of his or her own inner life. Womanism specifies a mode of activity which is non-academic, non-ideological and relevant to everyday life. Walker's most comprehensive definition for the term is given in the introduction to her 1983 essay collection. Its four subdivisions elaborately describe the inherent implications in the term:

Womanist 1. From womanish (Opp. Of girlish, i.e., frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) ... Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior....

2. Also: a woman who loves other women, sexually and/or non-sexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women ... sometimes loves individual men. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female.

3. Loves music. Loves the moon. Loves the spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. Loves the folk. Loves herself.

4. Womanism is to feminism as purple to lavender. (Walker, xii-ii)

This lengthy definition reflects Walker's commitment to balance and denotes a critical metamorphosis in an adolescent girl which may occur after a traumatic experience. She should move beyond herself and learns to care for others and make a conscious effort to explore the dreams and rituals of the communal realities shared by black people. Alice Walker focuses on the improvisational nature of womanism which extends into different zones of oppression and aims at the collective well-being of all. It is a survival strategy centered on self-discovery, confrontation, dynamism and wholeness. Walker's definition sets the standards for womanism as a socially transformative strategy which works through dialogue, coordination, creativity, mediation and hospitality. It offers nurturance both inside and outside the group. The personal wisdom necessary for self-sufficiency comes from love and sets the stage for mutual as well as self-love: love of nature and oneself. A harmonious, democratic relationship between people, nature and the spirit will act as a cathartic healer and the final self-healing is achieved through a willed return to authentic black culture.

3.2. Judith Butler's Concept of Agency

The central issue in Butler's theory is the assertion that body, sex, gender and subjecthood are not all cultural or linguistic constructions. She rejects the humanist notion of the subject as a natural or universal given. And it is exactly this incoherence which opens the way for further multiplicity and subversion and the possibility of reflection and reconstruction emerges. The issue of agency as a critical concept was introduced by Judith Butler as an inherent possibility in the very relations of power. Derived from Michel Foucault's theory of power, Butler rejects the idea of a fully determined, controlling subject; In contrast, she proposes possible shifts of meaning in the signifying system. In *Bodies That Matter*, Butler asserts:

Agency is implicated in the very relations of power it seeks to rival, a turning of power against itself to produce alternative modalities of power, to establish a kind of political contestation that is not a pure opposition, a transcendence of contemporary relations of power, but a difficult labor of forging a future from resources inevitably impure. (1993, 241)

Power is both repressive and productive and agency is born in the very discursive system itself. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler clearly asserts that “there is no possibility of agency or reality outside of the discursive practices that give those terms the intelligibility that they have, the task is not whether to repeat but how to repeat... to displace the very gender norms that enable the repetition itself.” (1990, 202) Agency is the possibility of an “I” which is constructed through the process of signification, the same rules which regulate the legitimacy of every repetition. In a word, agency is the ability to emerge through norms.

Butler’s earlier texts, *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies That Matter*, offers a restricted notion of agency. But Butler’s theories were further developed in her 2003 Adorno Lectures where she introduces the issue of inter-subjective recognition which is the key issue in the long process of transformation experienced by black women. In her view, the intelligible subject is not a naturalized foundation and is produced through social or political structures of power which are open to new possibilities defined as ‘agency’. Butler clarifies the relation between construction and agency thus:

Construction is not opposed to agency. It is the necessary scene of agency, the very terms in which agency is articulated and becomes culturally intelligible. Thus the critical task is to locate strategies of subversive repetition enabled by those constructions, to affirm the local possibilities of intervention through participating in precisely those practices of repetition that constitute identity. (1990, 147)

The first version of agent formulated by Butler was a little negative, being powerful enough to recite, re-signify and resist but not act liberally. In a word, such a subject can never master her own life. It was in her 2003 Adorno Lectures that Butler addresses the notion of agency in a new light which is more compatible with the initiative, empowering agent sought by black feminists. Butler’s lectures focus on inter-subjectivity: a philosophical term which represents the inherent social nature of man and the importance of shared recognition in shaping one’s ideas. In this light, Butler redefines the subject, not merely formed through power, but comes into being through communal relations.

Butler's introduction of the concept of inter-subjectivity opens a more positive dimension of agency: moral agency is born which is potentially initiative enough to deviate from standards and transforms the system. The construction of subjective agency is highly reliant on the love and support of others and is a complementary entity through which one achieves self-recognition. Discourse, no longer an oppressive entity for blind submission, lays the ground for the mutual interactions of the subjects by which agency is established. Such an agent is characterized by contingency, and is an active participant in the process of self-definition; S/he would ask for the love and support of the other members of the society. This inherent social nature of man and the necessity of developing communal relations is what matches the notion of 'agency' with 'womanism': both highlight the importance of connectivity, decentralization and commitment to change and the survival of all. Womanist strategy and Butler's notion of agency are the tools taken up by the researcher in this study to scrutinize the process of female subject formation and intellectual empowerment. Paradoxically, both strategies highlight coordination, mutual help and relationship. The final individual formed thus would be qualified enough to act personally and socially.

4. Investigating Alice Walker's *Possessing The Secret of Joy*

Alice Walker's 1992 novel, *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, is a careful attempt at cultural reading. It is through Tashi's life and traumatic experiences — particularly the mutilating genital circumcision — that the stage is set for the evaluation of female construction in the African culture and the ethnic and mythological forces which shape the ideal African identity. Alice Walker's clever epigraph in the beginning of the novel sets the ambiance: "When the axe came into the forest, the trees said the handle is one of us." (Walker, i) Metaphorically, those who support the patriarchal machinery and perform the initiation are women like M'Lissa, who are doubly victimizing and victimized. The initiation rite was a secret weapon to ruin black women's self-esteem and integrity and turn them to obedient, blind bearers of the yokes of tradition. This traumatic experience left a permanent mark in Tashi's mind and returned back recurrently in the form of a nightmare to her fractured mind. The content of her dream is horrifying:

There is a tower, she says. I think it is a tower. It is tall, but I am inside. I don't ever really know what it looks like from outside. It is dark, there is an endless repetitive sound that is like the faint scratch of a baby's fingernails on paper. And there are millions of things moving about me in the dark. I can not see them. And they have broken my wings. They've forcing something in one end of me and from the other they are busy pulling something out. (Walker, 26-27)

Tashi's image is a helpless creature whose wings are broken. To defy the crippling system, Tashi finally killed M'Lissa, the guardian angel of the patriarchal monopoly who paradoxically enough, was herself a crippled victim of the system. Her revolutionizing attempts to bring back a degree of autonomy and her personal quest for truth resulted in communal resistance made by the other black women; Thus personal becomes political and ties of solidarity were strongly knotted. The researcher shall scrutinize the gradual enlightenment of Tashi with reference to selected critical notions of womanism and agency.

4.1. Womanist Will to Power: From Resilience to Resistance

Tashi, the female protagonist in *Possessing the Secret of Joy* has proved her womanist stance in two ways: Firstly, as a strong-willed dedicated woman who tries to assert her solidarity with other black women in the Olinkan community even at the expense of her own fragmentation; Secondly, she presents herself as a willful, autonomous woman who searches for the truth and was bold enough to escape the hypocrisy underlying Olinkan traditional norms. Her personal quest for truth reveals all the unspoken mysteries and it was Tashi who made the first attempts at bringing balance and health back to the community of women.

Olinka is a native African community which has always been dominated by white colonizers over the years. Native Olinkans resist by not yielding blind-fold to the imposed dictates of white missionaries and stick to their own traditions. The more colonization extended, the more zealous the natives grown to follow their own traditions, even the most violent ones like facial curves and genital mutilation. Tashi expresses her anger at the spreading white colonization early in the novel:

We who had once owned our village and hectares of land now owned nothing. We were reduced to the position of beggars-except that there was no one near enough to beg from, in the desert we were in ... Who are you and your people never to accept us as we are? Never to imitate any of our ways? It is always we who have to change. You want us to change, I (Tashi) said, so that we are like you. And who are you like? Do you even know? You are black but you are not like us. You barely have your own black skin, and it is fading. (Walker, 22-23)

Not going voluntarily through the traditional rites is deemed an act of betrayal and despite all the physical and psychic dangers of genital mutilation and facial marking, she put herself at the mercy of a tsunga to "make her people feel better." (Walker, 7)

Tashi feels more satisfied, as this ritual initiation elevates her to be a member of the Olinkan society, the blessed sought for membership and solidarity which is advocated by all women in general and womanists in particular. “Here and there a defiant cheek bore the mark of our withered tribe. These marks gave me courage. I wanted such a mark for myself.” (Walker, 24) Olinkan women feel proud of themselves and the assertion of their tribal identity is what stands above all the physical and emotional traumas. It is an open expression of resistance to the change brought by the white missionaries. Their black skin and the traditional rites- however inhuman and disastrous they may seem- are the only remnants of identity left for them. Tashi’s initiation identifies her as a warrior in the Olinkan society: “The operation she’d done to herself joined her, she felt, to those women, whom she envisioned as strong, invincible. Completely woman. Completely African, Completely Olinkan.... Terribly bold, terribly revolutionizing and free.” (Walker, 63). The wound may turn to be her guide. It takes a few years for Tashi to understand the pain of the mortal pain she has inflicted upon her soul and body. The resulting physical and emotional ‘cramps’ opened Tashi’s eyes and changed her to an active, self-defined agent.

Her first step towards the achievement of agency was propelled by the help of the old psychiatrist, Mzee (Uncle Carl), who is reminiscent of Carl Gustav Jung, the famous Swiss psychiatrist. The climatic moment of revelation comes for Tashi after watching a black and white recorded movie made by the Old man. The scene presented several small children lying down on the ground circled by inattentive adults. Suddenly Tashi felt an overwhelming fear and fainted. The next morning, she painted madly on the wall of the bedroom. It was through painting that her repressed memory of her sister’s murder (who bleeds to death after the initiation) and her own nightmarish experience come to the surface. Tashi experiences another ‘initiation’, this time to bring back her long-forgotten vitality.

Tashi’s transformation is yet far from complete. She has kept silent so far about her own mutilated body and it was through developing close bonds with Raye, a black American psychiatrist, that the deeply entrenched advices made by the tribal leaders lost their significance. Like any other Olinkan woman, she has absorbed the myth and enacted the initiation: “To be accepted as a real woman by the Olinka people; to stop the journey. Otherwise, I was a thing.” (Walker, 120) Now that she confesses the brutality and inhumanity of the Olinkan tradition, Tashi was bold enough to talk openly about all her repressed memories, and resolve the long-held trauma in her mind. The newly-born Tashi, audacious, willful and eager to know more, has achieved a greater degree of

autonomy and is endowed with the potential to play the role of an exemplary, metamorphosed woman. Tashi's resistance is not just on the personal level. What changes her into a real revolutionary agent is her determination to enter the public horizon and openly defies the elders by killing M'Lissa, the so-called traditional saint who is much hailed for her services to perpetuate the dehumanizing traditions. Tashi's resistance is a perfect example for the enactment of the notion of agency.

4.2. Agency between the Personal and the Political

Tashi's role in *Possessing the Secret of Joy* vacillates between being a victim and a rebel. She has rendered her body half-torn through the initiation process just to gain the strength and love of the Olinkan community. Yet, paradoxically suffered and regretted all her life for this blind acceptance, she has decided to dismantle the source of all her sufferings: to kill M'Lissa, the tribal mutilator. After participating in therapy sessions and finding an appropriate explanation for her dark nightmares-where she saw herself imprisoned in a termite hill as a queen- through Pierre's anthropological studies, Tashi's consciousness was reformed in a new way and she felt strong enough to denounce the torturing tradition in the public sphere: "If you lie to yourself about your own pain, you will be killed by those who will claim you enjoyed it." (Walker, 106)

Tashi has started her open defiance by resistance, "by not believing them." (Ibid. 164) She was to be executed publically not just for killing M'Lissa; rather she was doomed to death because she has broken the silence about the inherent cruelty of the tribal traditions. In a society where the inherent cowardice of women has rendered them powerless, it is very difficult to stand on one's own. Yet, Tashi dared to be different; she killed the 'sacred' circumciser and faces her final execution defiantly and wholeheartedly: "I should get some rest. I want to be alert tomorrow, not to miss anything. Ache Mbele, I say. Ache is Yoruba and means "the power to make things happen", energy. Mbele means "forward" in KiSwahili." (Walker, 271) Tashi really moved forward energetically:

I was not able to comprehend death except as something that had already happened to me. Dying now does not frighten me. The execution is to take place where this government has executed so many others, the soccer field. I will refuse the blindfold so that I can see far in all directions. I will concentrate on the beauty of one blue hill in the distance, and for me, the moment will be eternity. (Walker, 276-277)

She returns back to the original place of her trauma to confront it whole-heartedly and work through the liberating process. Realizing that this time the culprit is not white, Tashi dismantles the long-held tribal monument-M'Lissa. While in prison, she was

heartily supported by not only her own family members, but also by other black women who were gathered in the prison area. The collective support and protest of women is reminiscent of the kind of womanist solidarity advocated by Walker: “Women traveled from all parts of the country to place offerings beneath that shrubbery that is just below and around the corner from my (Tashi’s) view. The women bring wildflowers, herbs, seeds, beads, ears of corn, anything they can claim as their own and that they can spare. They are mostly quiet. Sometimes they sing.” (Walker, 191)

Tashi has dared to create a balance between her life as a victim and her role as an active agent. She emerges as a warrior whose suffering was liberating for the other sufferers. Her wound turns to a guide for the whole community of black women. Her willful confrontation with reality pushes her towards action. But her revolutionary action shall come to useful conclusion, if and only if it was taken and completed by other women. Fortunately, it was indeed taken by them:

Each woman standing beside the path holds a red beribboned, closely swaddled baby in her arms, and as I pass, the bottom wrappings fall. The women then place the babies on their shoulders or on their heads, where they kick their naked legs, smile with pleasure. It is a protest and celebration the men threatening them do not even recognize ... In front of them kneels my little band of intent faces. Mbatu is unfolding a banner, quickly.... RESISTANCE IS THE SECRET OF JOY! It says in huge block letters. There is a roar as if the world cracked open and I flew inside. I am no more. And satisfied. (Walker, 278-279)

The symbolic silent protest made by women is evidence enough that Tashi’s desperate efforts to raise their consciousness were not in vain. She was indeed successful in opening their eyes to the inherent violence and inhumanity in the traditional doctrines. Her case may most probably be taken by her spiritual daughter, Mbatu, and the liberating mission will be completed. Tashi’s quest for more knowledge, her entry into the realm of the unknown, and her final daring action to kill the fountainhead of suffering, qualifies her to be praised as an active agent. Tashi’s ordeal was completed through her own active quest for truth, her outrageous defiance and the womanist love and support provided by other black Olinkan women. Tashi’s legacy for the next generation will be best summarized in the slogan “Resistance Is the Secret of Joy”, which written on a banner and held by Mbatu, Adam, Olivia and all those who were witness to her monumental act of courage.

5. Conclusion

A quick glance at the portrayal of female protagonists in Alice Walker's succeeding novels may illustrate how each one has gone through her own individual process of self-discovery. While Celie's ordeal in *The Color Purple* was more individual, Tashi's mission in *Possessing the Secret of Joy* was more aimed at a personal as well as political reformation. Tashi, the young Olinkan girl who was herself a silent witness to her sister's mutilation and death, has undergone the same ritual years later to comply with the elders' demand and find her position as a "purified", clean woman in the tribal society. Paradoxically, what has qualified Tashi as a true member of the society has ravaged her body and soul in the most violent way.

It took years for Tashi to come to terms with her mutilated body and soul. But it was not an easy task. She has to go through all her suppressed fears and memories and restructure the fragmented pieces of her life. Her long journey of individuation was triggered by the therapy sessions where she opened her heart to The Old Man (Uncle Carl) and later on Raye, the black psychologist. But like all the other Walkerian characters, Tashi has to return back to her origins to be able to uncover the underlying violence behind the tribal rituals. It was through the help and support of Pierre- Adam's son by Lisette- that Tashi discovered the mythological justification behind all the tribal impositions. Armed with enough knowledge and determined to assert her lost identity, she murdered M'Lissa- the old woman who was hailed as a national monument for all her life-long services to perpetuate the patriarchal system- and openly defied the Olinkan tribal system. It was her final daring gesture which changes her from a victim to an all-knowing agent and promotes her to the status of an exemplary black woman. Her mission was not just an act of individual reformation. Her example was soon to be followed by other black women.

The present study thus proves to be a justifiable illustration of the necessity of materializing womanist strategies through the establishment of a healthy combination of individual reformation and collective and/or political transformation. It is naturally concluded that the victim's true agency would be achieved through genuine personal and political resistance. As is clearly shown at the final part of the novel, the black mothers, who have witnessed Tashi's execution, carry young healthy baby girls upon their shoulders. It is a hopeful sign of the future path taken by black mothers: they have learnt their lesson and are determined to train strong, healthy young women open to take all the pleasures of life freely. Tashi's legacy for the emerging generation of women is clearly

presented in the banner held by the women at the scene of her trial as a sign of solidarity: RESISRANCE IS THE SECRET OF JOY. Tashi's mission was completed and was heartily taken up by the young black mothers who are now the makers of the future.

Funding:

No funding has been received for conducting this research.

Conflict of Interests:

There is no conflict of interest to disclose.

References

- Bartlow, Susanna Rose. "Vulnerability as Armor: Embodied Spiritual Commitment of Alice Walker, Audre Lorde and Toni Cade Bambara". diss. State University of New York At Buffalo, 2009.
- Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*. New York: Routledge, 1993.
- . *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge and Chapman Hall Inc., 1990.
- Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment*. New York: Routledge Classics, 2009.
- Garton-Gundling, Kyle. "Ancestors We Didn't Even Know We had: Alice Walker, Asian Religion, and Ethnic Authenticity". *Journal of Transnational American Studies*, 6(1), 2015.
- Harris, Melanie L. *Gifts of Virtue: Alice Walker and Womanist Ethics*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.
- Hooks, Bell. *Ain't I a Woman? Black Women and Feminism*. New York: Routledge, 2015.
- . *Feminist Theory from Margin to Center*. Cambridge: South End Press Classics, 2000.
- Lauret, Maria. *Alice Walker*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.
- Leasure, Lavie Totten. "Zora Neale Hurston and Alice Walker: Womanist and feminist Theories Meet in the Garden, The perspective of Difference". Diss. Indian University of Pennsylvania, 2005.
- Phillips, Layli. ed. *The Womanist Reader*. New York: Taylor and Francis Group, 2006.
- Salih, Sara. *Judith Butler*. New York: Routledge, 2002.
- Simcikova, Karla. *To Live Fully Here and Now; The Healing Vision in the Works of Alice Walker*. New York: Lexington Books, 2007.
- Treard, Isabell van-Peteghem, "Womanism, Sexual Healing and the Suture of Eco-spirituality in Alice Walker's Novels from Meridian to Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart" In *The Search for wholeness and diaspora Literacy in Contemporary African- American Literature*. Castro-Borrego, Silvia Pilar, eds. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011.

Walker, Alice. *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*. New York: Random House, Inc., 1998.

---. *Living by the Word*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Inc., 1988.

---. *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. New York: The New Press, 1992.

White, Evelyne C. *Alice Walker: A Life*. New York: Norton and Company, 2004.