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# AFRICAN WOMAN RISES FROM THE ASHES: ALICE WALKER'S MIMICRY OF CLASSIC ETHNOGRAPHY IN *POSSESSING THE SECRET OF JOY*

## Abstract

Before the advent of deconstructive schools of thought in the second half of the twentieth century, anthropology and ethnography were hailed as scientific disciplines whose major consideration was to provide an objective analysis of other cultures. However, the launch of such critical approaches as postcolonialism, feminism, and postmodernism has nullified the two disciplines' claim to scientificity and objectivity by laying bare their sexist, racist backdrop. In the postist zeitgeist, new ethnographies have been promoted in an attempt to disrupt the hierarchical relationship between the researcher and the studied subject of classic ethnography through including first-hand marginalized voices. Moreover, they blur the long-held generic boundaries between science and fiction via establishing the "ethnographic novel" as a medium that committedly voices the subalterns. Alice Walker's *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992) is one of these new ethnographic novels which has as its protagonist an oppressed African woman. What makes Walker's work distinct

and notable is that the feminist writer subversively employs the conventional mode of ethnographic writing to stand up to African patriarchy and its horrific ritual of female circumcision.

**Keywords:** Alice Walker, *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, postmodernism, feminism, ethnographic novel

## 1. Introduction

Prior to the emergence of the mid-twentieth century critical movements, anthropology and its pragmatic data-gathering wing, ethnography, were presented as objective and scientific academic disciplines whose main purpose was allegedly to know *other* peoples and ethnicities. The word anthropology consists of two Latin roots; anthrop- which means people and -logy which denotes knowledge, hence the science of “knowing people.” This simple definition is dubious since many other fields, like psychology and sociology, also announce as their main priority the study and analysis of people. So anthropology needs to possess another prominent feature which can distinguish it from other similar disciplines. In effect, classic anthropology is concerned with the analysis of the differences between the studied object and the cultural norms of the anthropologist. However, it must be borne in mind that this preoccupation with differences and the subsequent classification of diverse populations according to these differences are not a development unique to the nineteenth century (the formal date for the launch of anthropology as a scientific discipline), but are the quintessential elements of human life and identity construction (Metcalf 21).

Given the principles of classic anthropology, the researcher and the object of study should necessarily belong to two different cultures in order for the ethnographic project to make sense. That is why the field “concerned itself principally with recording the life and habits of peoples from societies not the observer’s own – usually distant locales, distant, that is, geographically or culturally from the West” (Ashcroft, Griffith, and Tiffin 79). This means that an ethnographer would inevitably conceive the two cultures as “discrete entities, entirely separable from each other” (Kanneh 7).

Ashcroft, Griffith, and Tiffin define ethnography as “that field of anthropological research based on direct observation of and reporting on a people’s way of life.” As the definition illustrates, any anthropological study is composed of

two main sections: fieldwork, which is the process of data accumulation via direct observation, and reportage, which is the transcription (and interpretation) of the gathered information and its presentation as a written document (79). The investigation of differences among cultures seems quite justified and even praiseworthy insofar as it recognizes the existence of differences as an acceptable and inevitable outcome of cultural development all around the world. In this way, the main objective of the discipline is to know other peoples and spread this knowledge through the so-called scientific and objective medium of written reportage.

This paper tries to depict the racist and sexist inclinations within classic ethnography, further showing how Alice Walker, as a postmodern feminist African American writer, mimics the conventional mold of ethnographic writing to strip the genre of its discriminatory attributes and employ it to promote the emancipatory cause of marginalized black women. The next section of this research project addresses the postcolonial and feminist critiques of anthropology as an ideological system of representation fraught with stereotypes and falsifications. Then, it discusses the advent of new ethnographies and how they have contributed to “voicing” the subaltern groups in the anti-establishment atmosphere of the second half of the twentieth century. The last section of the paper is dedicated to a close reading of Walker’s *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992) as a postmodern, feminist ethnographic novel, depicting how the black American novelist subversively uses ethnography to lambast the patriarchal rite of female circumcision in Africa.

### ***2.1. Postist Critique of Anthropological Studies***

The rise of postmodernism, feminism, postcolonial studies, and other anti-establishment movements has shed strong doubts upon the impartiality and innocence of anthropological studies. Postmodernism rejects the possibility of scientific objectivity altogether, stressing that science, like other fields, is regulated and controlled by the politics of power, and thus can never divest itself of ideological biases (Metcalf 157). So according to postmodernism, the putatively scientific fields of anthropology and ethnography are “always caught up in the invention, not the representation, of cultures” (James Clifford, qtd. in Campbell and Lassiter 123). Maxwell Owusu shares a similar critical attitude and argues that scientific empiricism has a “normative focus” which tries to maintain the “equilibrium of the social order” and achieve “cultural homogeneity” (311).

Feminism also takes anthropology to task, noting that the discipline has turned into a masculine and masculinist field which systematically puts under erasure the women of the studied cultures, a process rejected by Vicki Kirby as anthropology's "sexual indifference" (127). In addition, postcolonialism, more vehement in its criticism than the two other mentioned movements, denounces the politicization of anthropology as an agent of colonialism. According to post-colonial critics, the discipline justified the institution of colonization by providing "scientific" accounts which interpreted the cultural differences between the colonizer and the colonized as signs of the latter's backwardness and inferiority (Uddin 459; Wolfe 43-44; Caulker 110). Therefore, it can be asserted that the common denominator between the three resistant movements is a critique of anthropology for its exclusive, biased, and discriminatory discourse.

Edward Said is one of the most renowned postcolonial critics who refers to the complicity of anthropology in the construction and perpetuation of the colonial discourse. Throughout his canonical book *Orientalism*, first published in 1978, Said repeatedly points to the interrelationship between colonization and such so-called scientific disciplines as anthropology, linguistics, historiography, biology, phrenology, geology, psychology, or even economics, which all tried, in one way or another, to vindicate colonial oppression by Otherizing and inferiorizing the indigenous populations (Ashcroft and Ahluwalia 63-65). According to Said, all these disciplines took use of a "simple comparativism" to justify and reinforce imperial binarisms based on a linear model of progress which regarded the Western subject as the ultimate of human achievement and denigrated the non-white, non-Christian object as the lowest human species (qtd. in Caulker 110).

Postcolonial critics contend that the *scientific* preoccupation with Otherness never resulted in mutual recognition, respect and tolerance as the very existence of differences was used to naturalize their suppression in favor of a homogenized cultural discourse. As Serge D. Elie puts it, "The unfortunate consequence is the reification of anthropology into a form of Eurocentric ventriloquism . . . , an intellectual imperative to discover, or more accurately to construct, the world as a cornucopia of difference" (57). That is to say, the colonizer was well aware of the fact that to contain the indigenous voices and justify the systematic dispossession of the natives, military power alone does not suffice; cultural effacement is also required as a part of the strategy of subjugation (Simpson 67).

Furthermore, the anthropological discourse was to a great extent imbued with the racism embedded in the evolutionist narratives and most notably Social

Darwinism (Wolfe 44-45). Influenced by the Darwinian climate of the late nineteenth century, anthropological studies gained momentum synchronic with the growing expansion of the Western empire and particularly, the Scramble for Africa. To prove scientifically that a given race is inferior based on the civilization-scale of progress paved the way for those apologists who hailed colonialism as a good-willed enterprise aimed at bringing light to the dark abodes of the earth (Beyad and Roshnavand 137-138), hence their employment of the metaphor of “Lampadephoria” to eulogize colonization (Symonds, qtd. in Davies 24).

Importantly, anthropologists and ethnographers played a major role in providing a scientific basis to hierarchize races and rationalize colonization. As Ania Loomba writes of the depiction of Indian people by British anthropologists, the discipline was not concerned with revealing a real picture of the native population, but just tried to “master colonial subjects” through representing them as “unalterably alien.” In so doing, the so-called scientific studies more frequently than not resorted to the prevalent negative stereotypes of the natives, a representational strategy which confirmed Western anthropology’s “inability” (or reluctance) “to comprehend what it seeks to codify” (86). According to Nasir Uddin, the researcher in classic anthropology was almost always an outsider (we) that studied the natives (they) from a secure vantage point, a relationship which mirrors the unequal power relations in the sociopolitical and ideological equations of the outside world (458-459).

It is worth mentioning that the process of data gathering for a classic anthropologist was a far cry from scientificity and objectivity, and reflected a hierarchical conception of race based on which the Western researcher was deemed superior to the native object of study. Early anthropologists rarely lived among the indigenous population for a long period of time and gathered their data through interviews with the native informants in the houses of missionaries and colonial administrators (Campbell and Lassiter 57). In other words, anthropology in the colonial era did not derive its information from fieldwork and direct observation, but so very much looked at travelogues and missionary accounts (which abounded with falsifications and stereotypes) to form an “objective” picture of the native culture (Kanneh 7). This explains why the anthropologist’s unfamiliarity with the local language and discursive practices made the Western process of linguistic and cultural translation deeply flawed (Owusu 311). The very act of reporting is power-laden, and ideological too. Campbell and Lassiter note that “to write about another culture is to inscribe an imposed narrative order” (19).

On that account, the question of representation, that is, who has got the dominant voice and who has the agency to speak for O/others, is a significant issue addressed by recent critical ethnographies. As Bryman puts it, “ethnographic research is not just how it is undertaken ... but how it is written” (qtd. in Uddin 461). The next section of the article aims to demonstrate how postcolonial studies, alongside feminism and postmodernism, deconstructs the discipline, redraws its boundaries and proposes new experimental techniques to replace the old, Eurocentric ones.

## **2.2. *Postist Zeitgeist and the Advent of New Ethnographies: The Other Finds Voice***

Over the past decades, the legitimacy of classic anthropology has been debunked by anti-establishment movements which condemn the existence of just one sole authority and authorial voice to describe (or better to say, construct) O/other cultures. Consequently, a number of critical ethnographies have emerged which, as James Clifford notes, collectively emphasize dialogue and reciprocity between the anthropologist and the culture under study: “The principle of dialogical textual production goes well beyond the more or less artful presentation of ‘actual’ encounters. It locates cultural interpretations in many sorts of reciprocal contexts, and it obliges writers to find diverse ways of rendering negotiated realities as multisubjective, power-laden, and incongruent” (qtd. in Campbell and Lassiter 124). The scholar engaged in these critical approaches (which include narrative ethnography, autoethnography, collaborative ethnography, reflexive ethnography, paraethnography, etc.) regards other racial and ethnic groups “as varieties of the *self* rather than as varieties of the *other*” (Dan Rose, qtd. in Campbell and Lassiter 124).

Within the field’s new approaches, the we/they dichotomy has been abolished in favor of a “symbolic death of identity” (Wengle, qtd. in Uddin 459) and the ethnographer “tries to be a part (popularly known as ‘going native’ or ‘being there’) of the local society by building rapport so that s/he can get insight of aspects s/he intends to understand” (Uddin 459). So in order to democratize and decolonize ethnography and extricate it from its exclusive and discriminatory qualities, there needs to be a “reflexive engagement” between the researcher and the people s/he intends to study; that is, a kind of bilateral relation that involves “mutual trust” is required. This attitude can bring about a “depth of understanding” prominently absent in biased classic accounts. The new ethnog-

raphy deconstructs “the absolute authority of ethnographer” and incorporates “local narratives” in the script to corroborate the findings, hence the demise of the unilateral and vertical relationship between the two sides. Accordingly, the ethnographer no longer enjoys an Archimedean vantage point from which s/he can intrusively gaze at the Other cultures and whimsically interpret them (Uddin 462). Moreover, the new ethnography does not necessarily have to be etic; on the contrary, it is recommended that it be emic; that is, narrated from the perspective of an individual from within the studied culture and interpreted in terms of that culture’s domestic elements (Galliford 196).

Significantly, the anthropological discourse has been from the very beginning informed by and commingled with fiction, especially the popular travelogues of the colonized lands. However, in line with the rising popularity of scientific discourse in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, ethnographers tried to adopt the fashionable “objective” style of natural sciences while the content was still beholden to a great degree to travelogues, diaries, journals, and missionary accounts; hence the attribution of imaginary and stereotypical characteristics to natives and their ways of life under the prestigious cloak of scientificity. The point of note here is that before the mid-twentieth century and the rise of counter-cultural critical movements, historians and scholars used to regard anthropology as a scientific enterprise and turned a blind eye to its literary and fictive roots (Hulme and McDougall 6-10). Nonetheless, what made anthropology distinct from natural sciences is that the object of study was not immediately available for analysis like a bacteria or virus in a lab. Therefore, written texts, such as literary accounts, religious bulletins, and later, anthropological texts, filled this geographical and existential gap and made Other cultures and individuals available both to the masses and academicians (Thornton 502-503).

Borrowing from the postmodernist ethos, Paul Stoller views an emphasis on the body as one of the prime features of the new school of ethnographic writing. Rejecting the Western tradition of separating body from consciousness, he calls for a “sensuous ethnography” which envisions body as a site of sociopolitical and ideological inscription. Stoller notes that any perception of the world (be it historical, cultural, or otherwise) is represented in the body. Since bodily and perceptive experiences are perpetually volatile and in flux, no unified vision of history, society, gender, and race can be taken to reflect the Truth. In contrast, sensuous ethnography gives rise to “a set of instabilities,” which decenters the world and in this

way, “presents a matrix of possibilities and choices,” including the reconstruction of history and thus the recovery of subalternized voices (822).

As mentioned earlier, the postist frame of mind problematizes the issue of representation by reassessing “author(ity) or author(ization) of discursive knowledge” which a priori fabricated an Other as a tabula rasa upon which the dominator could project the imponderable and the unnamable. Thus, the new ethnography, alternatively called postmodern ethnography, rejects the fixating Self/Other duality in favor of an emancipatory plurality and a recognition of the different. It also disavows realism both as a representational strategy and a narrative style. It should be borne in mind that realism was (and still is) the main narrative strategy in scientific writing, especially in social sciences. At a time when scientific disciplines became the butt of postist criticism for their complicity with notorious regimes of power, it was quite expectable that realism would be also taken to task. Postist critics contend that realism, despite alleging to provide a faithful depiction of the outside world, constructs and fixates it (Clough 545).

Rejecting the conventional representation of studied objects as one-dimensional and partial, postmodern ethnography recognizes the existence of new subject positions created on the borderline of in-between spaces where the mainstream demarcations of gender, race, class, sexual orientation, and religion collide and (de)constructively interact. This recognition is highly significant in that the hybrid, multi-faceted subject of the new ethnography is no longer spoken for, but is voiced as an agentic consciousness that can choose to assimilate, appropriate, or completely deny the society’s dominant discourse (Clough 547-548). This means that the particularism of classic anthropology, that is, its systematic tendency to prioritize one particular ideology over O/others, is demolished in order to allow marginalized identities to come to the fore (De Angelis 2). Meanwhile, Dan Rose notes that the generic boundaries are blurred in the new ethnography within which sociology, anthropology, psychology, literature, autobiography, and philosophy are all mixed up. The result of such an eclectic approach in ethnographic writing is a “polyphonic, heteroglossic, multigenre” product that never claims absolute objectivity and truthfulness (qtd. in Tallman 11).

Self-reflexivity is another important characteristic of the new trend; that is, the researcher is fully conscious that scholarly composition is a subjective process and thus its final result is a construction that reflects the ethnographer’s personal taste and ideological stance (Hulme and McDougall 3). This

self-consciousness paves the way for the deconstruction of such conventional techniques employed in classic anthropology as verisimilitude, clear-cut journalistic reportage, and factual description. Liberated from the shackles of the old school and aware that the scientific research is reflective of the interests of a particular group and is on that account subjective, the ethnographer feels free to experiment with diverse genres and writing styles since she is no longer obligated to champion the discipline's much vaunted edifices of pure logic and neutral epistemology. Out of this iconoclastic approach, the ethnographic novel is born which openly and unabashedly combines the two seemingly irreconcilable realms of science and fiction (Tallman 11-13).

The ethnographic novel is defined as a narrative delineating the traditions, norms, habits, and social customs of a given culture. As discussed above, the new ethnography sees subjectivity and involvement as sources which can bring new insights into the field. These features can also be traced in postmodern ethnographic novels which enable native authors to express their subjectivity and describe their culture in the absence of the negating gaze of the First World academician. That is, the ethnographic novel tradition is valued for its disruption of objectivity and scientificity, the very virtues which defined classic anthropology. It goes without saying that the “insider” novelist is undoubtedly biased in her/his depiction of people, events and rituals; however, s/he possesses “a point of view unsullied by the culture-boundness and the blind-spots that accompany any outsider,” hence the emergence of “an authenticity” and “a knowledge of the [local] culture” unavailable to any alien anthropologist (Tallman 13). The ethnographic novel written by one within the native culture is of grave significance in that it resuscitates the voices submerged in classic anthropology. It further manages to transcend the conventional limits of Eurocentric anthropology which represented “only a small and distorted sample of human behavior as seen through the eyes of the outsider-spectator;” instead, it restores “a balance in cultural accounting” by incorporating “an insider’s voice” (Tallman 21).

Feminist ethnography is another subcategory of the new ethnographic school which alongside postmodern ethnography, ethnographic novel, and sensuous ethnography, deconstructs the old school and provides another subaltern group with voice and agency. A famous target of the feminist critique of anthropology was the French researcher Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908-2009) whose androcentric theories have earned him notoriety in feminist circles. In his anthropology, women, far from being autonomous subjects, just serve as a means

of coalition-building among patriarchal societies (Metcalf 111). The situation is even exacerbated for non-white women who are to a large extent ignored in Eurocentric and misogynist anthropological studies of Other societies.

Elaine Lawless, the American folklorist, praises feminist ethnography for its persistent “denial of hierarchical constructs that place the scholar at some apex of knowledge and understanding and her ‘subjects’ in some inferior, less knowledgeable position.” She further states that this inclusive approach “seeks to privilege no voice over another and relies on dialogue as the key to understanding and illumination” (qtd. in Campbell and Lassiter 123). In line with the ethnographic novel, feminist ethnography valorizes subjectivity over objectivity, which, according to Kamala Ganesh, is a euphemism for masculinist bias. Ganesh also touches upon the interrelationship between the personal and the social, arguing that the consciousness-raising project of the discipline can be realized via “sharing of personal experience of discrimination” and the exposure of “the small and micro level processes of ‘women’s world’” (2146). The critic also enumerates several features for feminist ethnography, including “reflexivity and dialogue in the mode of doing as well as writing,” “a recognition of the subjective nature of the fieldwork process,” and “stress on difference . . . and on experimental writing of the ethnographic text so as to reflect the presence of the potential readers as well as the writer” (2147). Embracing the postmodern mantras of eclecticism and syncretism, Ganesh rejects “the monopolistic authorial voice” of classic anthropology in favor of a “polyvocal” narrative that can be achieved by empowering indigenous researchers (2146).

In similar fashion, Kamala Visweswaran urges the inclusion of multiple feminine voices in new ethnographic writing, which, she contends, should address both “women like ‘us’” and “women unlike ‘us’” (595-596). Importantly, she does not stop there and emphasizes that feminist ethnography ought to challenge all kinds of essentialist and totalitarian power structures and not just those which disfavor women. Visweswaran strongly cautions against seeing women “as sole subjects, authors, or audiences of feminist ethnography,” stating that all critical versions of the discipline can be termed feminist. Ethnographic fiction, with its stress upon subjectivity and generic mixture, can also serve as an effective medium to promote a feminine perspective of events, dismiss stereotypes and give a human portrait of women (593-594).

The inclusion of subaltern voices in feminist ethnography is highly significant if we note that Western feminism has for long represented only a small

group and overlooked non-WASP women and their suppression by both Western and native patriarchies. Micaela Di Leonardo denounces this exclusionary representational strategy as the “synecdochic fallacy” of Western feminism, saying it can never achieve a universal status as long as it maintains its hegemonic “part-for-whole logic” (77). Elizabeth Enslin additionally urges the subjectivizing of the discipline through “first-person accounts and fiction,” stating that the Self/Other dichotomy and sexist power relations can be revised by inserting authentic women’s voices (538). By the same token, she notes the ability of experimental narrative strategies to add polyphony and dialogicity to the ethnographic composition and disrupt the absolute authority of the researcher by enabling the subaltern groups “to speak for themselves” (544). Meanwhile, Kirby supports generic experimentation since in her view, the women’s situation in different parts of the world is so complex and multifarious that it cannot be described through “the either/or of masculinism’s notion of truth telling” (128). She also recommends collaboration and empathy between the ethnographer and the researched in lieu of the former’s “detached stance of neutral observation” in classic anthropology (130).

Having scrutinized the classic and postmodern ethnographies, we can now critically examine Walker’s *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, an ethnographic novel that mimics the classic trend of anthropological writing only to wreak havoc on its colonialist, racist, and sexist discourse.

### 3. Classic Ethnography on Its Head: Walker’s *Possessing the Secret of Joy* as a Postmodern Feminist Ethnographic Novel

Walker’s *Possessing the Secret of Joy* is an audacious novel like her other works in that it attempts to discredit ethnography, a bastion of racist patriarchy. In order to realize such a lofty aim, she takes use of “mimicry,” a postcolonial technique which allows the subaltern to imitate the oppressor’s norms and mediums with the aim of subverting them; that is, she concocts her story in the very container which she intends to break. Though *Possessing* can indubitably be called an ethnographic novel for its inclusion of many details as to African cultural practices, particularly the misogynist rite of female circumcision, it constantly deviates from classic anthropological studies to reveal the field’s power-laden crevices. By so doing, she employs anthropology as a medium to express black women’s sufferings and serve their emancipatory cause. In other words, she mimics ethnography only to strip the genre of its racist and androcentric implications. This section is dedi-

cated to a close reading of *Possessing*, intending to touch upon the novel's mimicry and subsequent deconstruction of classic ethnography.

In *Possessing*, Walker follows her womanist project to unite wronged women from all around the world by addressing the taboo subject of female circumcision in Africa. As some sort of a sequel to *The Color Purple*, *Possessing* has as its protagonist Tashi, an Olinkan woman who appeared in her former novel as the lover and later wife of the protagonist's son, Adam. In *The Color Purple*, it was mentioned that Tashi decided to undergo the painful ritual of infibulation just to prove her loyalty to the long-held customs of her tribe and also to distance herself from the white colonizers who were usurping Olinka's native land and uprooting its native culture.

*Possessing* describes the physical and psychological ramifications of female circumcision and how they ruin the protagonist's matrimonial life following her inability to have a fulfilling sexual intercourse and later her delivery of a deformed and retarded baby as a result of her artificially tightened vagina. Therefore, her life in the United States as the African wife of an African American man brings her no tranquility and composure since she is still beset with the consequences of the unfortunate experience. Pifer and Slusser point to the detrimental influence of infibulation on Tashi's body and soul, stating that "the trauma of the mutilation . . . took away her sexuality, and arrested her emotional and verbal expression" (50).

First of all, Walker's employment of stream of consciousness as the narrative style for *Possessing* seems justifiable on many levels. Aiming to mimic and deconstruct the conventional ethnography, Walker opts for a technique which was beforehand adopted by William Faulkner in *As I Lay Dying*. Such a structure displaces the authenticity and veracity of one single perspective by incorporating several narrators and thus providing multiple valid viewpoints on the events of the plot. This technique evidently targets the racist Eurocentric ethnography which used to prioritize the white observer as the only legitimate vision who sees, evaluates, and passes absolute judgments on the lifestyle and customs of the observed population who was totally unvoiced and thus was represented and spoken for by the so-called objective researcher. It needs to be pointed out that the novel's "composite" narrative structure aims to represent the fragmented psyche of the protagonist whose loss of bodily integrity and human agency has precipitated her depression, psychosis, and dementia (George 360).

Another point of note which testifies to Walker's anti-establishment inclinations is the space the narrative provides for the reader to become an active agent in the process of ethnographic discovery and also an interpreter of the events of the story. In other words, "the reader is called into the text's story and participates in its telling" (Gourdine 240). This further undermines the sacrosanct vantage point of the observer-researcher in conventional ethnographic texts, and paves the way for the incessant interaction and give-and-take among the writer (observer), characters (objects of study), and the reader.

As a postmodern writer, Walker is an ardent supporter of rewriting *history* since she believes that the construct is in fact an instrument in the hands of the patriarchal racist dominators to bolster their grip on power. In *Possessing*, she heeds the complicity between colonialist ethnography and historiography, and thus sets out to delegitimize both through the combination of the personal and the political. Walker recounts in her autobiographical book *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* that she was deliberately shot in the eye by one of her brothers and lost parts of her vision in her childhood years. Critics maintain that her obsession with such controversial themes as incest, rape, exploitation, and maltreatment of women stems from this traumatic childhood experience which left her partially blind in one eye. Warren and Wolff contend that Walker's wounded eye/I becomes "the center of her physical, social, and sexual self" (1) and also "the source of her militant feminism and activism for human rights" (2). Likewise, Olakunle George notes the similarity between Walker and Tashi, stating that both have embarked on a "quest for wholeness," following the traumatic assaults against their bodily integrity by the impassive agents of patriarchy (357).

It should be borne in mind that Walker's choice of female sexual organ as the central image of her novel is a conscious attempt to foreground women's body and *sensuality* as a credible site of agency and not just a tool to gratify the desires of the patriarch. Moreover, Walker does not consider herself as an outsider who observes African rituals with a condescending and contemptuous eye. In point of fact, Walker's womanist agenda allows her to feel at one with the repressed African women who are black and systematically raped just as the black Walker was herself *ravished* by her brother. In other words, the writer's ethnographic text does not reinforce the vertical relationship between the observer and the observed, but attempts to take the misogynist native culture to task *from within*. Significantly, her mimicry of ethnography enables the novelist to delegitimize the conventional methods and hierarchical racist positionings in the field while

at the same time criticizing the androcentric mores of the African culture. Some critics hold that Walker's ethnographic novel aligns with the tradition of colonialist "missionary" writing since they both tend to lambast African native cultures (George 356; Russell-Robinson 54-56). Nonetheless, Walker's main purpose is to employ the genre of ethnographic writing only to bring to limelight the suffering of black women as one of the most marginalized and persecuted groups in Africa.

Walker herself notes this dilemma with regard to her critique of genital mutilation, admitting that the Western mindset may come to view the ritual "as a way of describing Africa as being backward and savage and barbaric, and feeding into all those sorts of racist perceptions" (qtd. in Warren and Wolff 9). The writer, however, stresses that she does not aim to target Africa and African rituals but tries to expose and objugate the misogynist discursive practices all around the world. To prove her point, she states that female circumcision is not just an African ritual and that it is practiced in different parts of the world (including the Middle East) and on women of all races. Resultantly, any call to eradicate this custom and the likes of it should be regarded as a universal struggle against (patriarchal) oppression (Warren and Wolff 10).

As expected from a postmodern feminist writer, Walker opposes any "uncritical" acceptance of Africa and its ways of life (George 361). *Possessing* finds a new significance if we note that few Africans have touched upon infibulation in their works because the practice is "clearly shrouded in taboo" and "covered in deepest embarrassment" (Ponzanesi 305). As Geneva Cobb Moore states, Walker intends her novel to be "a political diatribe against the social diseases of tribalism and sexism," and by that means she "strips Africa of the romantic image bestowed upon it by black writers in the 1960s and the Harlem Renaissance artists of the 1920s" (113). Her critique *from within* is explicitly pointed out in the novel when Tashi stipulates that "White is not the culprit this time" (106).

Walker's attempt to mimic and undermine conventional ethnographic writing via fiction is in line with the postist ethos which tends to blur the distinctive line between the so-called scientific research and fictive works of art and imagination. Gourdine holds that classic anthropological research "marginalized narrative, relegating it to footnotes, hints, prefaces, and small-print case histories." Walker "revisits" this essential "dilemma" in conventional ethnography by mixing the two hitherto distinct entities (238). This disregard of generic boundaries

once again demonstrates postmodernism's skeptical view as to the objectivity of scientific research and highlights the defining role of human psyche in making sense of the outside phenomena.

As a feminist ethnographer-novelist, Walker provides a cogent analysis regarding the African patriarchy's insistence on ritual female circumcision. The following excerpt from the novel records a discussion among Olinka's male elders who compare women to a termite queen and try to justify the harrowing and dehumanizing rite of infibulation:

Number three: We are thankful to God for all His gifts...

Number four: Since God has given her to us, we must treat her well.

Number one: We must feed her so that she will stay plump...

Number three: If left to herself the Queen would fly...

Number four: But God is merciful.

Number one: He clips her wings.

Number two: She is inert ... that is God's will.

Number one: And did He not put the Queen's body there to make our offspring?

Number two: And to be our food?

Number three: It can not be denied.

Number four: And when she rose up ... As a man would!

Number one: She did not see God's axe...

Number three: God struck the blow that made her Queen!

Number four: Beautiful enough for him to fuck...

Number two: God liked it tight...

Number four: God is wise. That is why He created the *tsunga*.

All: With her sharpened stone and bag of thorns!

Number one: With her needle and thread...

Number three: God likes to feel big.

Number four: What man does not? (237-238; emphasis original)

The above extract is one of the most revealing passages of the novel in that it wraps up the *raison d'être* of the African patriarchal discourse, culminating in the practice of female circumcision. Tashi heard this discussion when she was a child, but unconsciously repressed its memory since then, because it reminded her of the early death of her beloved sister, Dura, in the hands of the village's *tsunga*, Walker's made-up word for an African woman who circumcises girls around the age of puberty. In a groundbreaking turn of events, Tashi recalls the elders' argument at the end of the novel and only then, manages to disentangle herself from the paralyzing aftermaths of the rite and find her long-lost composure and self-esteem.

This passage clearly harkens back to the stereotypical representation of black woman in racist, androcentric ethnography as both a symbol of erotic titillation, to be voyeuristically devoured by the white male gaze, and also of sexual perversion, to be contained and suppressed by the corrective sententious white hand (Gilman 237). Here, the patriarchs are fearful that the Queen might be dissatisfied with her *natural, God-given* status as a mere fertilizer and escape her "inert" condition. In consequence, she must have her wings (i.e., vulva) severed and her vagina tightened so that the king (i.e., the patriarch) would receive utmost sexual pleasure.

Likening a woman's vulva to wings is also quite telling. Cutting a woman's vulva in fact obviates the possibility of oral stimulation, so a woman would remain dependent forever on masculine (and masculinist) phallus as the only fetish which can induce her orgasm. This fear of women's sexual autonomy (which may result in lesbianism) goads African men into a vicious struggle to maintain their supremacy; they strongly reject any attempt to abolish the painful ritual of circumcision as a treacherous act against their time-honored beliefs and customs, while in reality it is just an excuse to further reinforce their hegemonic domination over women.

Walker's repudiation of phallus as the emblem of absolutist power is also evident in her description of Adam and Tashi's pre-marital sexual relationship. The protagonist states that before marriage, they frequently had oral sex, and, remarkably, she "always" reached orgasm (122). The fact that Tashi had an utterly fulfilling sex life before genital mutilation heightens the physical and psychological pain she undergoes as a result of losing orgasmic pleasure (Ponzanesi 312). In effect, the secret of joy mentioned in the title is the vulva itself, which makes redundant the overbearing presence of the phallus and undermines an-

drocentric norms of society (Gourdine 237). Notably, female circumcision is so significant within the patriarchal discourse that a woman would never be recognized as worthy and marriageable without having already undergone the ritual (Sample 170-171). Moreover, an uncircumcised woman is deemed unclean in the patriarch's eye and is even further ostracized for betraying her tribal customs (Lalbahsh, Khoshnood, and Gholami 97).

As Gourdine puts it, the novel discusses two major groups of women in society – “those who are forbidden . . . the right to own their bodies in natural totality, and those who forbid others this right” (237). The first group is represented in the novel by Tashi and the second by M'Lissa, the practitioner of horizontal hostility who ruthlessly deprives women of the secret of joy as the tsunga of the tribe. The novel's epigraph also adumbrates this bifurcated representation of black women: “When the axe came into the forest, the trees said the handle is one of us.” The blade of the axe emblemizes and implements patriarchy with the help of the wooden handle, i.e., the women who are complicit with the misogynist discourse. The unfortunate result of such a baleful collusion is the extirpation of the trees, that is, women's bodies, which thereupon lose their life force and vitality and metamorphose into lumbers. In effect, Walker deliberately depicts African women as complicitous with the androcentric status quo to spread this important message that patriarchy can be exterminated only if in the very first place, women “unlearn” sexism and emancipate themselves (Sample 169). For instance, Tashi criticizes her mother for aiding and abetting patriarchy by keeping silent against the brutal practice of infibulation, stigmatizing her as “She Who Prepares the Lambs for Slaughter” (275). Thus, to Walker, women's self-awareness and activism are indispensable for the abolition of the cold-blooded “slaughter” and the prospective liberation of the oppressed gender.

Walker also blames women's surrender to such excruciating experiences as part of their tactless attempt to appeal to masculinist sexual fantasies. That is, tightening one's vagina, black women's effort to bleach their skin color and straighten their kinky hair, the rising demand for breast implants and the fanatic desire to lose a considerable amount of weight through strict diets are different components of a patriarchal spectrum which prioritizes male sexuality (and its gratification) over women's convenience.

As one of its major themes, *The Color Purple* reflects the detrimental influence of colonization on African traditions and sources of livelihood, showing

how it callously appropriated lands and marginalized their ancestral owners. Though *Possessing* does not directly deal with the question of colonization, the two novels' thematic interconnectedness provide a solid ground to compare whites' conquest of Africa and black patriarchs' oppression of native women. Highlighting the double marginalization of African women, *Possessing* indicates that "women and land are both victims exploited and manipulated by men, no matter Black or White" (Lalbakhsh, Khoshnood, and Gholami 93). George also refers to such a relationship between women and nature, denouncing infibulation as "an inscription of [misogynist] culture on nature" and "a denaturalization of the [female] body" (358).

However, *Possessing* should not be deemed as a tragic novel because Tashi eventually manages to surmount the traumatic experiences of her life and their aftermaths with the help of another subaltern figure, Pierre, the bisexual born out of the free love affair between Adam and Lisette, a white French woman. It is worth mentioning that Tashi can experience the epiphany-like moment of individuation at the end of the novel only when she disentangles herself from the society-imposed self-criticism and dares to apportion blame on the dominant patriarchal discourse and its agents such as M'Lissa who caused her sister to bleed to death and also paralyzed the protagonist's sexual and expressive powers after the excruciating ordeal of circumcision. Tashi compares her healing process to the stiches of a wound, which, as Pifer and Slusser maintain, symbolize both pain and recovery (53). Hence, the phrase "painful stich," used by the protagonist, is completely opportune in this context: "I felt a painful stitch throughout my body that I knew stitched my tears to my soul. No longer would my weeping be separate from what I knew" (83).

Now that she has restored and appreciated her fragmented self, Tashi is able to leave the United States and return to Africa, face her torturer M'Lissa, and even take her revenge by murdering the old woman. Though she is executed in the end, the novel does not finish on a tragic note as Tashi happily asserts just before her demise that she is "reborn" (279). The protagonist is contented and pleased with her execution by the death squad since she has already united native women against patriarchy and its discriminatory discursive practices: "There is a roar as if the world cracked open and I flew inside. I am no more. And satisfied" (281). Tashi opted for activism and resistance as the only ways to combat injustice and discrimination, and passed on this epiphanic knowledge to the women of her ancestral land. Notably, while she was being put to death,

a rally was going on and she could see the courageous and awakened demonstrators just moments before her loss of life. Much to her happiness, the protesters held a banner reading, “RESISTANCE IS THE SECRET OF JOY” (281). As Moore maintains, taking action against “lies (imposed through silence upon suffering women in a patriarchal social order) is the real secret of joy” (114).

Moore also contends that the novel addresses “a psychological process that promises individual harmony and wholeness for those earnestly seeking self-knowledge and well-being.” The critic further touches upon the protagonist’s journey from an inferiority complex and a severely split identity to self-esteem and resistance, stating that it closely resembles Carl Gustav Jung’s concept of individuation “with its aim of bringing the questing individual to a state of spiritual maturity and peace” (111). This is to signify that any quester will be able to find “the god within his or her Self” only if s/he dares the arduous struggle (112). As in *The Color Purple* and *Meridian*, Walker’s other feminist novels, the process of re-membering the Self and reclaiming self-respect in *Possessing* is once again triggered by a very devastating incident that verges on trauma. In contrast to the stock reading of psychosis as incapacitating and devaluing, Walker portrays madness “as a means to facilitate both the character’s therapeutic journey toward self-knowledge and her developing radical political consciousness” (Sample 170).

Tashi notes “the limitations of the ego-centered consciousness” and ultimately comes to understand that without a hybrid, all-embracing and universalist worldview (what Walker promulgates as womanism), she is able neither to free herself from the grip of her traumatic past nor to help other subaltern women find their voice and withstand totalitarian hegemony (Moore 112). George also touches upon Walker’s “universalist” stance towards the oppression of women and argues that the novelist posits a “transcultural category of the female body,” which has been for long abused and disfigured by diverse “patriarchal ideologies” all around the world (344).

According to Moore (114), Walker employs six personas throughout *Possessing* to depict Tashi’s disjointed and fragmented psyche: Tashi (her African tribal name); Evelyn (the name she is given upon acquiring US citizenship); Tashi-Evelyn and Evelyn-Tashi (both referring to the severe double consciousness of the protagonist); Tashi-Evelyn-Mrs. Johnson (addressing how Tashi’s hyphenated character as an African-American is aggravated by her abortive

matrimonial life), and Tashi Evelyn Johnson Soul (showing how hyphens disappear and the Self reintegrates in the last chapter). That is why Tashi signs the last chapter of the novel as “Tashi Evelyn Johnson Reborn” (279) and comes to admit that “just at the end of my life, I am beginning to reinhabit completely the body I long ago left” (110).

In sum, *Possessing* once again evinces Walker’s conscious attempt to mimic racist and sexist modes such as traditional ethnography. The result of this subversive strategy is an intricate narrative which recounts the phoenix-like rise of the protagonist from the ashes. In other words, the postmodern novelist not only refrains from rejecting ethnography altogether, but even instrumentalizes it to promote the feminist cause.

#### 4. Conclusion

Postmodernism is nowadays a fashionable and popular topic of discussion, and has both its own ardent exponents and staunch detractors. However, while analyzing postmodernism, it should be borne in mind that the school of thought is not a homogenous entity with a finite set of static attributes that can be defined and listed easily; it is rather a multifaceted movement whose every single aspect needs a thorough analysis; otherwise, any attempt to fathom and interpret it would remain lopsided and biased.

Though the movement has multiple domains of applicability, it can be asserted that postmodernism, in all its forms and modes, enjoys an anti-establishment bent which pits it against hegemonic, monistic, and holistic discourses. That is, the movement not only recognizes the existence and legitimacy of peripheral voices but also tries to demarginalize them. For that reason, postmodernism has appealed to such emancipatory political movements as feminism, postcolonialism, and queer studies which all have opted for an alliance with it in order to reinforce their fledgling front against the dominant exclusionary discourses.

Linda Hutcheon, one of the most frequently cited critics of postmodernism, calls attention to the movement’s “negativized rhetoric” which consistently talks of “discontinuity, disruption, dislocation, decentering, indeterminacy, and antitotalization” (3). Referring to such a terminology as evidence, she counters Terry Eagleton’s criticism regarding the sociopolitical apathy of the movement, stressing that postmodernism is “resolutely historical and inescapably political”

(4); in an overtly political gesture, the postmodern mindset embraces “multiple and provisional” differences (6), and thus questions the conformity attached to the homogenizing idea of “consensus” (7).

A postmodernist per se, Alice Walker is today known and praised for her feminist novels. A staunch supporter of the women’s quest for liberation from patriarchal supremacy, Walker reflects her activism in all her literary productions through an audacious discussion of such controversial subjects as rape, incest, lesbianism, and female circumcision, the topics which have been largely untouched by the United States’ mainstream literature.

Walker employs her version of feminism, which she terms “womanism,” as a strategy to deconstruct the dominant sexist stereotypes of black women and to empower them to stand up in the face of patriarchal manipulation. Though Walker pays special heed to African American women’s marginality, she never stops there, and tries to include other subaltern groups in her theory. Walker defines a womanist as

a black feminist or feminist of color. . . . A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women’s culture, women’s emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counter-balance of laughter), and women’s strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally universalist. (*In Search* xi)

As the quotation shows, she starts her reconstructive redemptive project from the black woman, and then expands it to include all races, genders, and species, i.e., the whole creation, including both humanity and nature. It is no surprise that Walker, a universalist, stands up in *Possessing the Secret of Joy* to protect the oppressed women in Africa (and many other parts of the world) against the horrific ritual of infibulation. Dismissing the colonialist, missionary, or ethnographic writings for their patronizing and condescending stance towards the natives, Walker employs multiple “insider” voices to express the suffering of Tashi and other marginalized women in Africa.

Considering Walker’s deconstructive mindset, one might rightfully expect the blurring of traditionally fixed boundaries in her works. In the postmodern vein, she blends the scientific, objective mode of ethnographic writing with

fiction in *Possessing*, creating a ployvocal narrative that disrupts both generic demarcations and hierarchical power structures. Notably, *Possessing* is not a stereotypical argument of a racist, misogynist ethnographer whose intrusive gaze fixates and reifies black women; it is instead a critical account that records the process of feminist metamorphosis from passivity, trauma, and inadequacy to subjectivity, empowerment, and resistance.

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# AFRIČKA SE ŽENA DIŽE IZ PEPELA: MIMIKRIJA KLASIČNE ETNOGRAFIJE U ROMANU ALICE WALKER *POSJEDOVATI TAJNU RADOSTI*

## Sažetak

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Prije pojave dekonstrukcijskih pristupa u drugoj polovici dvadesetog stoljeća, antropologija i etnografija bile su predstavljene kao znanstvene discipline čiji je glavni cilj bio pružiti objektivnu analizu drugih kultura. Međutim, nastanak kritičkih pristupa kao što su postkolonijalizam, feminizam i postmodernizam doveo je u pitanje težnju tih disciplina prema znanstvenosti i objektivnosti razotkrivanjem njihove seksističke i rasističke pozadine. Postmodernistički *zeitgeist* doveo je do nastanka novih etnografija u pokušaju da se naruši hijerarhijski odnos između istraživača i proučavanog subjekta, predmeta klasične etnografije, neposrednim uključivanjem marginaliziranih glasova. Štoviše, te su nove etnografije oslabile čvrste žanrovske granice između znanosti i fikcije uspostavom „etnografskog romana“ kao medija koji predano daje glas podčinjenima. Roman Alice Walker *Posjedovati tajnu radosti* (1992), čija je junakinja potlačena afrička žena, jedan je od tih novih etnografskih romana. Ono po čemu je rad A. Walker zamjetan jest subverzivna uporaba konvencionalnog etnografskog pisma kojom se izriče otpor afričkom patrijarhatu i njegovom užasnom ritualu ženskog obrezivanja.

**Ključne riječi:** Alice Walker, *Posjedovati tajnu radosti*, postmodernizam, feminizam, etnografski roman