

How Female Genital Mutilation Ruins a Life: Tashi's Story in *Possessing The Secret of Joy*

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Abstract

Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) is clearly one of the cruelest examples of violating women's human rights. It is generally performed under primitive conditions and may result in death, and even the lucky ones who can survive have to face its disastrous consequences both in their social and sexual life. Its main aim is to prevent a woman having a sexual satisfaction by removing clitoris, which would avoid sexual intercourse before marriage or avoid adultery, and to enable men have more pleasure out of sexual intercourse by making the vagina tighter. In Possessing the Secret of Joy, we read Tashi's story; she has sex with her boyfriend and experiences orgasm before getting married although in her society it is strictly forbidden. Then, she decides to get mutilated as a reaction to the colonial forces. However, she cannot reach sexual and mental satisfaction she had before, and, in the end, she decides to kill the woman who mutilated a lot of girls and Tashi herself. The novel gives the reader an insight into the suffering of mutilated women while telling the reader how and why it is still practiced. The aim of this paper is to show in which ways women are forced to perform FGM and how their lives are devastated after the procedure via studying Walker's protagonist Tashi's life. The theoretical framework of the study will be drawn from Simone de Beauvoir's The Second Sex, an outstanding book in the history of feminist theory as it is often thought to be the starting point of second-wave feminism. In this paper de Beauvoir's views on the role of traditions, taboos, and religions in women's oppression, women's longing for social acceptance, chastity and women's dilemma while trying to conform to society's expectations from her and how these views are reflected throughout Walker's protagonist Tashi's life is studied.

Keywords: *female genital mutilation, sexuality, women's rights, Alice Walker, Simone de Beauvoir.*

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Kadın Sünneti bir Hayatı Nasıl Yok Eder: *Hazzın Sırrına Sahip Olmak*'ta Tashi'nin Hikâyesi

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Bağımsız Araştırmacı

Öz

Açıktır ki Kadın sünneti kadınlara yönelik insan hakları ihlallerinden en ağır olanlarından bir tanesidir. Kadın sünneti genellikle ilkel koşullarda yapılır ve ölümlle sonuçlanabilir. Ölümle sonuçlanmayanlarında da kadın hem sosyal hem cinsel hayatında bu uygulamanın korkunç sonuçlarıyla karşılaşır. Bu geleneğin ana amacı klitorisi keserek kadını cinsel hazzdan tamamen mahrum bırakmak ve bu şekilde eşini aldatmasını veya evlilik öncesi cinsel birleşmeyi engellemek ve vajinayı daraltarak erkeğe daha fazla haz imkânı vermektir. *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (*Hazzın Sırrına Sahip Olmak*) adlı romanda Tashi'nin hikâyesini okuruz; yaşadığı toplumda evlenmeden önce cinsel birliktelik kesinlikle yasak olduğu halde erkek arkadaşıyla beraber olur ve orgazmı deneyimler. Daha sonra ise sömürgeci güçlere bir tepki vermek amacıyla sünnet olur. Fakat daha önce elde ettiği zihinsel ve cinsel doyuma bir daha asla ulaşamaz ve romanın sonunda onu ve daha birçok küçük kızı sünnet eden kadını öldürmeye karar verir. Roman, kadın sünnetinin nasıl ve neden hala uygulandığını anlatırken sünnet olan kadınların çektiği acıyı ortaya koyar. Bu makalenin amacı kadınların kadın sünnetine nasıl zorlandığı ve sünnet sonrası hayatlarının nasıl yerle bir olduğunu Walker'ın ana karakteri Tashi'nin hayatı vasıtasıyla anlatmaktır. Çalışmanın teorik çerçevesi Simone de Beauvoir'ın feminist teori tarihinde önemli bir yer tutan ve ikinci dalga feminizmin başlangıç noktası kabul edilen kitabı *The Second Sex* (*İkinci Cins*) çerçevesinde çizilecektir. Bu makalede de Beauvoir'ın kadına baskıda geleneklerin, tabuların ve dinlerin rolü, kadınların sosyal kabul beklentisi, namus anlayışı ve toplumun beklentilerini karşılamaya çalışırken kadınların yaşadığı ikilem noktalarındaki fikirleri ve bu fikirlerin Walker'ın ana karakteri Tashi'nin hayatındaki yansımaları çalışılacaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: kadın sünneti, cinsellik, kadın hakları, Alice Walker, Simone de Beauvoir.

Introduction

Woman? Very simple, say the fanciers of simple formulas: she is a womb, an ovary; she is a female - this word is sufficient to define her (de Beauvoir, 1997: 35).

Possessing the Secret of Joy, an outstanding book on sufferings of women by Alice Walker, was published in 1992. Walker is an American feminist author who has written books on gender, women, race and colonialism and has won Pulitzer Prize for Fiction for her *The Color Purple*. Tashi who had a minor part in *The Color Purple* is the main protagonist in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. Tashi's story shows the social oppression that led women to get genitally mutilated and the effects of it on women and society as a whole. The story begins with Tashi's childhood and the reader traces her until her execution. Meanwhile, Walker makes the reader feel how painful it can be for a woman to be mutilated, how she is forced to ruin her own life by her society, and how men both sexually and socially benefit from the mutilation of women. How a woman is made to conform to society's expectations at the expense of her life is a common theme which feminist theorists have written about, and Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* is a distinguished book which deals with the long history of women's oppression. Thus, this paper studies Tashi's motivations and social conditioning which led her to perform FGM and its devastating results in the light of de Beauvoir's descriptions of women's oppression in *The Second Sex*.

What is FGM?

Female Genital Mutilation or Female circumcision is a term given to the traditional practices involving the intentional cutting off or partial removal of the external female genitalia (WHO 1997). According to the form of the FGM the World Health Organization categorizes the various types of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) as partial or total removal of the clitoris and/or the prepuce (Type I: clitoridectomy), partial or total removal of the clitoris and the labia minora, with or without excision of the labia majora (Type II: excision) and Narrowing of the vaginal orifice with creation of a covering seal by cutting and appositioning the labia minora and/or the labia majora, with or without excision of the clitoris (Type III: infibulation) and All other harmful procedures to the female genitalia for non-medical purposes, for example: pricking, piercing, incising, scraping and cauterization (Type IV) (WHO, 1997).

Although defenders of FGM tend to see it equivalent to male circumcision since they both seem to be originated in religious or cultural practices, it is not a rational argument. There are many differences between them which make it impossible to put them in the same basket. First of all, male circumcision focuses on removing the foreskin but it never amputates a part of the penis, which would harm a man's sexuality or health. However, when it comes to the FGM, not only the female's outer vulva is removed but often the

inner vulva is also removed and the opening is stitched to form a small hole, which makes sexual intercourse and even urination or menstruation painful for women. Moreover, healing from male circumcision takes a very short time whereas healing from FGM may take months, and generally it causes an irreparable damage; the mutilated female can experience many health problems including haemorrhage, urinary retention, urinary infection, wound infection, and septicaemia, and more serious ones which may result in death. On the other hand, circumcision may even be advantageous for men; for instance, circumcised men tend to have less urinary tract infections. Another important difference between them is that while male circumcision does have no negative effects on male sexuality, FGM ruins woman sexuality in every possible way. In fact, in many cultures it is performed mainly to keep woman sexuality under control. In short, FGM and male circumcision can never be accepted equivalent to each other. Male circumcision cannot be seen a way of oppressing men; however, female genital mutilation is used to oppress women's sexuality by risking their lives. Male circumcision affects the circumcised male negatively neither in terms of his health or sexuality. On the other hand, FGM causes many health problems for a woman and may even cause her death. Also her sexuality is kept under control because all ways of physical and mental satisfaction are taken from her via mutilating her genitalia and causing a big trauma for her. Therefore, WHO organization accepts FGM a human rights violation:

Female genital mutilation violates a series of well-established human rights principles, norms and standards, including the principles of equality and non-discrimination on the basis of sex, the right to life when the procedure results in death, and the right to freedom from torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment as well as the rights identified below. As it interferes with healthy genital tissue in the absence of medical necessity and can lead to severe consequences for a woman's physical and mental health, female genital mutilation is a violation of a person's right to the highest attainable standard of health (WHO, 2008: 9)

Origins of FGM

The origin of FGM has never been identified certainly, and its genesis and growth are the issues that are highly speculative. The most extensive belief is that FGM has its roots in Islam. David Gollaher makes it clear in his assumption that "In the world of Islam, female circumcision has long been acknowledged as a rightful counterpart to male circumcision" (Gollaher, 2000: 191). Nevertheless, linking it to Islam does not lead us to its real origin. If Islam is the basis of the FGM, it is impossible to explain why non-Muslim societies insist on performing it or why some Muslim societies do not carry out any form of it. Despite being carried out in some Christian societies, FGM is not a Christian practice, either. Both the Christian and Muslim men of religion state that it is

a practice that precedes both Christianity and Islam. Some critics claim that it was an ancient Egyptian tradition as it is stated, “Marie Assaad feels that there is sufficient evidence to assume that FGM was practiced in ancient Egypt, and it was perhaps there that the custom originated” (Dorkenoo, 1994: 33). Another belief is that FGM is possibly originated in Africa as the most radical form of FGM, infibulation, is mostly seen in areas where Arab and Black African cultures meet. Accepting this view, James DeMeo claims that both female and male genital mutilations are transmitted from one region to another by relocation diffusion and the conquest of the cultures by the invasion of the other ones who mutilate (Dorkenoo, 1994: 33). He also notes that “Sub-Saharan Africa and Oceania genital mutilations were practiced independently prior to the Islamic period, notably among warrior-like people” (Dorkenoo, 1994: 33). In short, still it is not clear where FGM is originated and which culture was the first to perform it, as it was “known in Ancient Egypt and amongst ancient Arabs, and it is known to have existed in the middle belt of Africa before written records were kept. It is, therefore, difficult to date the first operation or determine the country in which it took place” (Koso-Thomas, 1987: 15). Although its origins are unclear, FGM is definitely a tool of patriarchal authority, which reinforces itself via traditions and taboos.

Enslavement of Women by Traditions and Taboos

The beginning of *Possessing the Secret of Joy* is striking enough to make the reader curious; Walker writes, “This book is dedicated with tenderness and respect to the blameless vulva” (Walker, 1992: 2). That is, Walker dedicates her book to all women, and especially to those who suffer since their femininity and sexuality are blamed for being the source of evil. It is undeniable that women all around the world have always suffered because their sexuality is exploited in many ways, and Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), the focus of *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, is one of the cruelest examples of exploiting women sexuality.

In *Possessing the Secret of Joy* through Tashi’s story Walker enables the reader to see how women are conditioned to perform FGM by traditions and taboos. As one of the cruelest tools of the patriarchal system, FGM, is, of course, supported by traditions and taboos, which usually function as the walking stick of patriarchy. Tradition “accounts for the most widely justification for the practice of female circumcision which follows generations of culturally embedded beliefs” (Lockhart, 2004: 15), and everybody all very well knows that these traditions and cultural beliefs are almost never in favor of women. As Simone de Beauvoir states:

History has shown us that men have always kept in their hands all concrete powers; since the earliest days of the patriarchy they have thought best to keep woman in a state of dependence; their codes of law have been set up against her; and thus she has been definitely established as the Other. This arrangement suited the economic interests

of the males; but it conformed also to their ontological and moral pretensions (de Beauvoir, 1997: 171)

In the novel, we see that traditions and taboos, which, as de Beauvoir states, are under the control of patriarchy, play an important role in the protagonist's mutilation. First, traditions and taboos forbid little girls from knowing their own bodies, the only aim of which is to please men; "[...] there is from the beginning a conflict between her autonomous existence and her objective self, 'her being-the-other'; she is taught that to please she must try to please, she must make herself object; she should therefore renounce her autonomy. She is treated like a live doll and refused liberty" (de Beauvoir, 1997: 308). Touching the genitalia is such a taboo that the small figures with genitalia are hidden as Tashi tells, "She found me playing with it, and boxed my ears, claiming the thing I held- a small figure playing with her genitals- was indecent" (Walker, 1992: 109). She suggests that these small figures which are called dolls derive their names from the term "idol" as they are the symbols of the Goddesses or a Creator; the female figure was so noble that it was thought to be the source of life at that time. After all, they are all "sent literally underground, painted on the walls of caves and sheltered enclosures of rock" (Walker, 1992: 197). Tashi's ideas that toys have all been changed in order to hide women's sexuality is supported by Amy, an American woman who has been mutilated and has a place in the novel as Walker "refuses to allow the U.S reader to distance himself or herself from the practice as one that affects only women of other cultures" (Richards, 2000: 139). Amy experiences circumcision when she is six years old. She is made to get mutilated by her parents since they are disturbed by the fact that Amy always touches her genital organ. Amy tells Tashi that, "even in America a rich white child could not touch herself sexually" (Walker, 1992: 185). In other words, all over the world, little girls are brought up in a way to be completely unaware of their own body and sexuality, "Now of course every little girl is given a doll to drag around. A little figure of woman as a toy, with the most vacuous face imaginable, and no vagina at all" (Walker, 1992: 198). Amy implies that even toys are in service of men's interests and the main idea behind this attitude is to alienate women from their bodies, "My own body was a mystery to me, as was female body, beyond the function of the breasts, to almost everyone I knew" (Walker, 1992: 119). If they do not know their bodies and sexuality, they do not know what to demand from their men. Tashi believes that it is the first step to enslave women, "I recognized the connection between mutilation and enslavement" (Walker, 1992: 137); women's only aim becomes to please their husbands. On the other hand, the process is very different for men as de Beauvoir explains:

The situation under consideration is profoundly different - biologically, socially, and psychologically - for man and woman. For a man, transition from childish sexuality to maturity is relatively simple: erotic pleasure is objectified, desire being directed towards another person instead of

being realized within the bounds of self. Erection is the expression of this need; with penis, hands, mouth, with his whole body, a man reaches out towards his partner, but he himself remains at the center of this activity, being, on the whole, the subject as opposed to objects that he perceives and instruments that he manipulates; he projects himself towards the other without losing his independence; the feminine flesh is for him a prey, and through it he gains access to the qualities he desires, as with any object (de Beauvoir, 1997: 393).

However, although she later understands that traditions enslave women, at the beginning of the novel Tashi prefers to be mutilated for the sake of her country's traditions. She prefers to do it, firstly, because their great Leader demands them to. Their leader tells women that it is a way to react against the colonialism; it is a way to tell the colonialists that Olinka people have their own culture and traditions. Tashi, thinking her people who "had once owned their village and hectares 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" (Walker, 1992: 23), decides to get circumcised. Her best friend Olivia, who is an American, tries to stop her. Tashi, however, is very determined and that Olivia is a foreigner also frustrates Tashi; she thinks that Olivia cannot understand how Tashi feels. For Olivia, it seems ridiculous to get circumcised willingly whereas Tashi is angry about the fact that the colonialists try to change them, "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" (Walker, 1992: 23). For Tashi, FGM has a different meaning; it is her fight against colonialism, "All I care about now is the struggle for our people" (Walker, 1992: 22). That is, circumcision is a symbol of her love for her country, which she will not hand over to the colonialists, "Otherwise I was a thing. Worse, because of my friendship with Adam's family and my special relationship to him, I was never trusted, considered a potential traitor, even" (Walker, 1992: 120). Their great Leader imposes it on the Olinka people that they mustn't leave their old beliefs and traditions and must keep them as a way to fight with colonialism and "No Olinka man would even think of marrying a woman who was not circumcised" (Walker, 1992: 120). To show that she wants to keep her country and her people free, and to save their traditions, Tashi goes to a camp and gets circumcised. She does that for the benefit of her country's freedom but she is unaware of the fact that she sacrifices herself for the benefit of patriarchal authority, which she would realize later.

Tashi's belief that she is mutilated for the sake of her country's freedom is only an illusion. Even though they are not under the threat of colonialism and of losing their liberty, girls are forced to get mutilated. It does not matter whether it is a colonized country or not, FGM always serves as a way for the girl to be accepted in society and prove her belonging to that community. Hence, carrying it out is very important in African societies where being socially accepted is crucial for people, and Tashi is one of those victims

longing for social acceptance. After the operation, she feels that she has got what she wanted; she feels herself “Completely woman. Completely African. Completely Olinkan” (Walker, 1992: 63). The other women in the camp are powerful, unbeatable and the operation she has had makes it possible for her to join that group; she is a strong African woman who cannot be beaten by the colonial forces. Tashi tells that although she has experienced orgasm before she is mutilated, she gives it up “To be accepted as a real woman by the Olinka people; to stop the jeering” (Walker, 1992: 120). In the novel, a story told by Pierre is quite inspiring to see how society oppresses people to carry on their patriarchal traditions. A man called Torabe marries a girl who runs away from him and drowns herself in water that doesn't even reach her knees. Before committing suicide, Torabe's new wife goes to her family and tells them how painful it is; “he had cut her open with a hunting knife on their wedding night, and gave her no opportunity to heal” (Walker, 1992: 136). Even her father, however, does not understand her and wants her mother to tell their daughter that it is her duty to endure the pain and please her husband. In “A Child's Big Letters: Orality, Literacy and Female Genital Mutilation”, Maria Lauret asserts, “In Olinka culture, mothers tell their daughters that they should comply with tradition” (Lauret, 2000: 25) just like the family in the story does. They send her back to her husband but she prefers to drown herself rather than going back to him. Torabe is isolated from the society as “he lost control of his wife, a very evil thing to do in that society because it threatened the fabric of life” (Walker, 1992: 137). The family is isolated, too, and the girl is taken out of the river and left to get rotten. There can be no empathy for the women who reject sexual intercourse because they suffer due to circumcision; rejecting to please her man is the biggest sin for a woman. Therefore, instead of worrying about their daughter, even parents are concerned about society's negative attitude against the ones who break the rules; as de Beauvoir asserts that “[...] even a generous mother, who sincerely seeks her child's welfare, will as a rule think that it is wiser to make a ‘true woman’ of her, since society will more readily accept her if this is done” (de Beauvoir, 1997: 309). The social punishment for the ones who do not comply with traditions can be very severe as it is seen in the story, so people cannot dare to break the rule and find a solution for it; otherwise, society does not give them the chance to survive.

Myths and Religion

Moreover, religious myths strengthen those unbreakable patriarchal rules. People keep telling them to keep the taboo unquestioned. As Beauvoir asserts that “As a rule, in consequence of the large part played by religion in the life of women, the little girl, dominated by her mother more than is her brother, is also more subject to religious influences” (317). Religion composed of myths in favour of FGM is “an elaborate excuse for what man has done to women” (Walker, 1992: 229) says one of Tashi's friends while the other one says

“nobody even knows why they do this thing” (Walker, 1992: 229). These mythical stories are accepted by everyone in the society even though nobody has ever seen any of them coming true. They believe the myths as if they have witnessed them coming true. One of the most known of them is that women’s genitalia is to grow like men’s penis unless they are cut and will prevent the men from penetrating:

Everyone knew that if a woman was not circumcised her unclean parts would grow so long that they’d soon touch her thighs; she’d become masculine and arouse herself. No man could enter her because her own erection would be in this way (Walker, 1992: 119).

This is acknowledged so strongly that Tashi is seen as a strange creature by her mutilated friends when she is not mutilated. Tashi describes the situation:

Certainly, to all my friends who’d been circumcised, my uncircumcised vagina was thought of a monstrosity. They laughed at me. Jeered at me for having a tail. I think they meant my labia majora. After all, none of them had vaginal lips; none of them had a clitoris; they had no idea what these things looked like; to them I was bound to look odd. There were a few other girls who had not been circumcised. The girls had been would sometimes actually run from us, as if we were demons. Laughing, though. Always laughing (Walker, 1992: 120).

In other words, woman’s body is something to be ashamed of if it is not cut to please the man more, and it is strengthened by religious myths, which have always been a tool in the hands of men to reinforce their authority. That is because religions generally give prestige to men not to women, as de Beauvoir states:

Now, in Western religions God the Father is a man, an old gentleman having a specifically virile attribute: a luxuriant white beard. For Christians, Christ is still more definitely a man of flesh and blood, with a fair beard. Angels have no sex, according to the theologians; but they have masculine names and appear as good-looking young men. God’s representatives on earth: the Pope, the bishop (whose ring one kisses), the priest who says Mass, he who preaches, he before whom one kneels in the secrecy of the confessional - all these are men. For a pious little girl, her relations with the everlasting Father are analogous to those she has with the earthly father; as the former develop on the plane of imagination, she knows an even more nearly total resignation (de Beauvoir, 1997: 317).

Likewise, an African religious myth that spares the godly prestige for man is told in the novel. The earth is like a lying female body to whom God approaches to have an intercourse with her. The earth, however, has a clitoris which is, surely, not circumcised and rises up showing her masculinity and preventing God from penetrating, “It was as strong as the organ of the stranger, and intercourse, could not take place” (Walker, 1992: 169). God

thought it was masculine and “since it was masculine for a clitoris to rise, God could be excused for cutting it down. Which he did” (Walker, 1992: 229). Only then could God have an intercourse with the Earth. It is clear that men are associated with God and women are related to Earth in the story. God which is the symbol for men is said to be “all powerful” (Walker, 1992: 169). It carries the assumption that men have the control on women and they have the right to do anything with women to please themselves as the owners of power in the world.

Therefore, by narrating the cruel story of FGM, as Constance S. Richards argues, “The discourse which Walker constructs is antipatriarchy” (Richards, 2000: 136) and Walker elaborates on the idea of God-men relationship, how men see themselves as the representatives of God on the Earth and women as their properties on whom they can impose their power and wills. It is, also, not just about cutting the clitoris that would grow and be an obstacle for them to penetrate; it is about getting more pleasure making the vagina as tight as possible while making women suffer instead of being satisfied:

God liked it tight. God liked to remember what he had done, and how it felt before it got loose. God is wise. That is why He created the “tsunga”. With sharpened stone and bag of thorns. With her needle and thread. Because he liked it tight. God likes to feel big (Walker, 1992: 223).

Chastity, Virginity and Oppression of Women

Men are considered to be the transmitters of God’s seeds, “Man is God’s cock. It drops the seeds” (Walker, 1992: 230). Men, however, are not able to identify their offspring; women can only know whose child it is. Circumcision is believed to avoid women having extra-marital sexual relationships as they do not have any pleasure in it but suffer. Thus, men claim that they have the right to circumcise women to be able to know their children, “the tsunga’s stitch helps the cock know his crop” (Walker, 1992: 231). That is, circumcision is an issue about inheritance for men as Richards states, “An approach to Possessing the Secret of Joy forces us to see the practice as one of many ways in which the sex/gender system under patriarchy attempts to control female sexuality and maintain lines of kinship and inheritance” (Richards, 2000: 137). Also, as the “gifts from God to men” (Walker, 1992: 231), women, for whom “self-possession will always be impossible to claim” (Walker, 1992: 271), are there to produce the children of men. Men are insistent on mutilating women and avoiding their pleasure as their idea is that “If left to herself the Queen would fly” (Walker, 1992: 231) and to prevent it “He clips her wings” (Walker, 1992: 231).

In other words, it is seen that the argument that women have to preserve their chastity by remaining virgin before marriage and remaining loyal to her husband after marriage is an efficient tool by patriarchy to keep women sexuality under the control of men. De Beauvoir explains how patriarchal

society sexually restricts women and how it imposes chastity as a property which should be owned only by women:

Patriarchal civilization dedicated woman to chastity; it recognized more or less openly the right of the male to sexual freedom, while woman was restricted to marriage. The sexual act, if not sanctified by the code, by a sacrament, is for her a fault, a fall, a defeat, a weakness; she should defend her virtue, her honour; if she 'yields,' if she 'falls,' she is scorned; whereas any blame visited upon her conqueror is mixed with admiration. From primitive times to our own, intercourse has always been considered a 'service' for which the male thanks the woman by giving her presents or assuring her maintenance; but to serve is to give oneself a master; there is no reciprocity in this relation. The nature of marriage, as well as the existence of prostitutes, is the proof: woman gives herself, man pays her and takes her. Nothing forbids the male to act the master, to take inferior creatures (de Beauvoir, 1997: 396).

Virginity has a vital role for women's position in societies where female genital mutilation is practiced, and people believe that FGM ensures a girl's remaining virgin. It is common in those societies to take the bride-to-be to a mid-wife and check her virginity. If a girl is not virgin, she is not suitable for marriage and if a girl is uncircumcised she is surely not virgin, "there is a strongly held belief that there can be no adult virgins amongst the uncircumcised and so none can be eligible for true matrimony" (Koso-Thomas, 1987: 9). Likewise, FGM is thought to be essential after marriage, as well. The clitoris is believed to be the main factor driving women to have uncontrollable desire for sex:

it is believed that the clitoris, left intact, causes women to become over-sexed, to respond too readily to sexual approaches and may provoke them into making uncontrollable sexual demands on their husbands (Koso-Thomas, 1987: 8).

If the husband is unable to satisfy her demands, a woman may look for extra-marital relationships; if she is not mutilated and she learns what it is like to have a real sexual experience is, she will be able to choose to be with another man who is abler to satisfy her desires. When clitoris is removed, women are prevented from having extra-marital relations without damaging her reproductive abilities. It is thought to be good for society, too, "it protects them from their own sexuality and from the risk of becoming promiscuous and thereby bringing shame and disgrace not only upon their families, but on the society at large" (Koso-Thomas, 1987: 8). Therefore, in order to prevent promiscuity women are the ones who are asked to make a sacrifice by performing FGM. Moreover, in some societies, the infibulated opening is a way to determine a woman's value, "the smaller it is, the more valuable her worth" (Lockhart, 2004: 16). While FGM kills all sexual pleasure for women, on one hand, its sole aim is to increase men's sexual pleasure on the other. FGM is believed to increase a woman's femininity as it is seen a way to "increase

male sexual satisfaction because of tightness of the vagina and attenuate female sexual desire” (Lockhart, 2004, 16). Fadwa El Guindi tells that while she was talking to the Nubian women about circumcision and pleasure in sex, one Nubian woman said to her, “circumcision makes a woman nice and tight. The man finds great pleasure in tight women, unlike Cairo women whose vaginas are wide enough for four men to enter together” (Abusharaf, 2006: 32). Women in this region believe that “man’s arousal and pleasure give much pleasure to women” (Abusharaf, 2006: 32). Clearly, women are conditioned to grow up as men’s toys for pleasure. De Beauvoir states that women can gain value in men’s eyes only “by modelling herself upon their dreams” (de Beauvoir, 1997: 359). She says;

[...] the passivity that is the essential characteristic of the ‘feminine’ woman is a trait that develops in her from the earliest years. But it is wrong to assert that a biological datum is concerned; it is in fact a destiny imposed upon her by her teachers and by society. The great advantage enjoyed by the boy is that his mode of existence in relation to others leads him to assert his subjective freedom (de Beauvoir, 1997: 307).

Collapse of a Woman’s Life after FGM

Although it gives every possible privilege to men, how tragic FGM can result for women can be seen after Tashi is mutilated. Tashi gets mutilated as she sees it a way of fighting with colonialism; however, she can never be happy in her new life. In other words, she is in between the dilemma each woman has to experience. De Beauvoir explains the dilemma of a woman when she tries to submit herself to social demands:

[...] a conflict breaks out between her original claim to be subject, active, free, and, on the other hand, her erotic urges and the social pressure to accept herself as passive object. Her spontaneous tendency is to regard herself as the essential: how can she make up her mind to become the inessential? But if I can accomplish my destiny only as the Other, how shall I give up my Ego? Such is the painful dilemma with which the woman-to-be must struggle. Oscillating between desire and disgust, between hope and fear, declining what she calls for, she lingers in suspense between the time of childish independence and that of womanly submission (de Beauvoir, 1997: 360).

Surely, Tashi’s sexual life is completely destroyed. The only problem is not with her sexual life, indeed. It causes both physical and psychological irreversible damage for her. Physically, she has problems with peeing and with her menstruation as the hole left is too small. Adam tells the physical effects of FGM on Tashi:

It now took a quarter of an hour for her to pee. Her menstrual periods lasted ten days she was incapacitated by cramps nearly half the month.

There were premenstrual cramps: cramps caused by the near impossibility of flow passing through so tiny an aperture as M'Lissa had left, after fastening together the raw sides of Tashi's vagina with a couple of thorns and inserting a straw so that in healing, the traumatized flesh might not grow together, shutting the opening completely; cramps caused by the residual flow that could not find its way out, was not reabsorbed into her body, and had nowhere to go. There was the odour, too, of soured blood, which no amount of scrubbing, until we got to America, ever washed off (Walker, 1992: 65).

Olivia, too, describes how Tashi physically changes after the circumcision; she tells that Tashi begins to walk in a way that all Olinka women do because of the scar they have, "The scar gave her the classic Olinka woman's walk, in which the feet appear to slide forward and rarely raised above the ground" (Walker, 1992: 65). Escaping from the psychological effects of FGM is not possible for Tashi, as well. Possessing the Secret of Joy is often read as Walker's critique of female genital mutilation and her examination of the threat it might pose to the individual psyche" (Richards 144) says Richards. Olivia indicates that Tashi seems to have changed psychologically and has lost all her liveliness:

It was heartbreaking to see, on their return, how passive Tashi had become. No longer cheerful, or impish. Her movements, which had always been graceful, and quick with the liveliness of her personality, now became merely graceful. Slow. Studied. This was true even of her smile; which she never seemed to offer you without considering it first (Walker, 1992: 65).

Tina Mcelroy Ansa describes the situation Tashi is in as: "She not only has a scar between her legs, but one as deep on her psyche as well. The circumcision has not only cut away her clitoris and the possibility of lovemaking that is not painful and humiliating. It has also eradicated her sense of self and ability to feel" (Ansa, 1993: 32). The harm in her soul is so deep that Olivia describes it as a "mortal blow" (Walker, 1992: 65) which can be seen by everyone. FGM's influence on Tashi continues for long years, and Tashi believes that she cannot take care of her husband and son Benny, "I watched Benny struggle with all his might to be close to me, to melt into my body, to inhale my scent; and I was like a crow flapping my wings unceasingly in my own head, cawing mutely across an empty sky" (Walker, 1992: 217). The circumcision devastates her life in every possible way.

What she goes through psychologically and how she sees sexuality, men and circumcision become clear when she faints while watching a film on TV with Adam and her psychiatrist. She loses her conscious when she sees a large fighting cock on TV, "The picture of a fighting cock, taken twenty-five years ago, completely terrorized me" (Walker, 1992: 71). The terror she lives is a big one; Adam describes her as "her body rigid as death, her teeth clenched in a fierce grimace and, most strange of all, her eyes open. So of course we

thought for a moment she'd died" (Walker, 1992: 75). The next day, Tashi begins to draw a picture of the cock and a foot in the corner of her pointing. The cock is the symbol of penis whereas the foot represents the "tsunga" as Tashi states "The foot above which I painted this pattern was a woman's, and that I was painting the lower folds of one of M'Lissas's tattered wraps" (Walker, 1992: 72). Tashi tells that there is something between the toes of the foot and the cock is waiting for it, "It was for this small thing that the giant cock waited, crowing impatiently, extending its neck, ruffling its feathers, and strutting about" (Walker, 1992: 71). The small thing here is the vagina that a "tsunga" brings to give it to a man. The stress on the bigness of the cock and the smallness of the thing shows how Tashi feels about sexual intercourse. Women's vagina is made too tight and small for a penis to penetrate making it very painful for women. However, men do not care about it as Tashi's using the word "impatiently" indicates. The description of the cock and the small thing in this sentence entirely demonstrates Tashi's image of sexuality after the circumcision. The bigger the cock gets, the more frightening it becomes for Tashi, "How nauseous; as the cock continued to grow in size, and the bare foot with its little insignificant morsel approached steadily toward what I felt would be the crisis, the unbearable moment for me" (Walker, 1992: 72). Tashi tells that the cock which she named as "The Beast" seems to be her real fear, "Indeed, I felt as if I were seeing the cause of my anxiety itself for the first time, exactly as it was" (Walker, 1992: 78).

The pain she goes through makes her completely reject what society imposes on her and the ideal for what she sacrificed herself. At first, she believes that FGM is an important part of her people's traditions and that it is a way to protect her country; however, her physical and psychological sufferings lead her to think that it is not a tradition that is essential for the good of the country. Instead, it is a way of murdering young girls. This makes her question the tradition, and she sees that what she has sacrificed herself for is a tradition that is rooted in religious myths and unspoken taboos; the sole function of it is to please men.

Tashi's husband Adam also opposes FGM. He states that men, who enjoy having the advantage being the superior ones, however, do not do any sacrifice and they cannot understand what women go through. What if they had the same operation and have their penis cut? Adam questions it:

If every man in this courtroom had had his penis removed, what then? Would they understand better that that condition is similar to that of all the women in this room? That, even as we sit here, the women are suffering from the unnatural constrictions of flesh their bodies have been whittled and refashioned into (Walker, 1992: 162)?

As Adam suggests, women carry their suffering everywhere, every time; men, nevertheless, are never aware of this fact. Men might understand what

women have to experience only if they went through the same process and lost their sexual power and pleasure, for which they have confined women to pain for centuries. This pain has continued for centuries as nobody has listened to and understood women. Adam tells that every woman who has experienced FGM is a little child who is unable to tell her misery and remains silent “screaming her terror eternally into her own ear” (Walker, 1992: 162). Men remain deaf to women’s pain, go on living their own lives and the inequality never ends. Even the great Leader, who urged the women in the country to get circumcised as a reaction to the colonial forces and to show how loyal they are to their own traditions, is incapable of figuring women’s problems out as he did not have any operation that would change his life, “Did our leader not keep his penis? Is there evidence that even one testicle was removed? The man had eleven children by three wives. I think this means the fellow’s parts were intact” (Walker, 1992: 238).

In other words, after so much suffering, both Tashi and her husband become aware of the fact that all the myths and religious stories are made up by patriarchal society to make FGM go on, and it does nothing but harm women. For that reason, Tashi considers that FGM is a way of murdering women not only physically but also mentally, and she decides to kill M’Lissa, who circumcised her. Tashi believes that M’Lissa, who has been recognized as a heroine by every faction of the government, including the National Liberation Front, is the murderer of her sister and many other Olinka girls. Tashi goes to the place where M’Lissa lives and is visited by a lot of people as she has become a famous traditional figure. For Tashi, M’Lissa is a cruel who caused deaths of little girls. However, Tashi later learns that M’Lissa is also a victim as well as being a murderer. M’Lissa was also circumcised when she was a child, and it left a damage on her leg as well as her vagina, “not only her clitoris, outer and inner labia, and every other scrap of flesh been removed, but a deep gash travelled right through the tendon of her inner thigh” (Walker, 1992: 211). It is clear that M’Lissa also suffered; nevertheless, she tells Tashi that she forgot about her childhood experiences, “The child who went to the initiation hut. You know I left her there bleeding on the floor, and I came out. She was crying. She felt so betrayed. By everyone. I couldn’t think about her any more. I would have died” (Walker, 1992: 218) and she went on doing what society wants her to although she also considers herself as guilty of what she does, “But who are we but torturers of children?” (Walker, 1992: 219) The fact that M’Lissa also suffered does not change Tashi’s belief that she is a killer and that she deserves to be killed. However, it is not clear in the book whether Tashi kills M’Lissa; the reader only knows that M’Lissa dies. Tashi appears at courts in America. Although she tells Olivia that she didn’t kill M’Lissa, she never rejects it at court thinking that she has suffered enough and it is time to go. She is sentenced to death and executed at the end of the novel.

Conclusion

The paper studies the story of Tashi, the protagonist of *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, under the light of Simone de Beauvoir's views on the oppression of women in *The Second Sex*. In this study, we first give a short overview of Female Genital Mutilation to conclude that it is not clear from which culture or religion this practice was first rooted from, but is always used as a patriarchal tool in the societies where it takes place. By drawing on passages from *The Second Sex*, we show that traditions, taboos and religious myths are influential means of keeping women under control, and we draw parallels between de Beauvoir's views and Tashi's life story, which shows the reader that FGM was strengthened by traditions, taboos and religious myths which all serve to men's desires. Another point that de Beauvoir indicates is that women have to follow what traditions, taboos and religious myths impose on them to gain social acceptance, a point reflections of which can be found in Tashi's story of mutilation, as well. She undergoes the procedure willingly to be a part of the fight against the colonial forces in her country and to be completely "Olinkan." However, her mutilation cannot provide her the mental satisfaction she looks for. Instead, Tashi's life is ruined in every possible way. The reader sees that all that lies behind the social conditioning that led her to FGM is meant to satisfy men's sexual needs and to deprive her of any kind of sexual desire or satisfaction, which would preserve her chastity. In other words, Walker creates a character that sees circumcision as a way to protect her own traditions but soon realizes that even the Leader, who advises circumcision as a way to prevent colonialism, is a man who benefits from women's suffering. Via Tashi's trials, the reader sees that it is vital to react to these traditions humiliating women and devastating their lives. Collective resistance to patriarchy is the way to save women's lives which are ruined by patriarchal oppression; as Walker says at the end of the novel, "Resistance is the secret of joy!"

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