



EXISTENTIAL CRISIS IN ALICE WALKER'S POSSESSING THE SECRET OF JOY AND ARUN JOSHI'S THE FOREIGNER

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ABSTRACT

Alice Walker, the winner of the prestigious Pulitzer Prize is a significant voice in the field of African American literature. Whereas Arun Joshi ,the winner of the Sahitya Academy award is one of the most celebrated novelists in the canon of Indian writing in English. Alice Walker studies the factors, which are responsible for blacks' conflicts, fragmentation, and identity crisis. The attempt of this paper is to study existential crisis in Walker's Possessing the Secret of Joy and Joshi's The Foreigner. The paper shows how both of the novelists have depicted existential sufferings of humanbeings. Walker throws light upon the evil practice of genital mutilation and convincingly shows women as victims of male patriarchy in the respective novel. Arun Joshi too delineates the human sufferings and existential crisis on the account of characters' quest for identity. Both of the novelists have done a similar attempt to show human's existential sufferings. They show human's attempt for identity formation as well.

Key Words: *Existential crisis, quest for identity, male patriarchy, sexism, conflict, etc.*

As Richard James writes “an existential crisis includes the inner conflicts and anxieties that accompany important human issues of purpose, responsibility, independence, freedom and commitment.” (13) In this respect Alice Walker's Possessing the Secret of Joy is significant which defines woman's marginal existence. The novel presents deplorable condition of women on the account of female circumcision , a custom in which woman's vagina is operated and tightened to make it more enjoyable for men. Walker has condemned the age old practice of female genital mutilation in this novel. The female characters face the problem of existence where they are circumcised under the pressure of male patriarchy. The novel successfully shows the gender politics behind this filthy practice. Tashi, the female protagonist who is circumcised before marriage becomes a victim of this practice. The novel puts forth the physical as well as mental trauma that Tashi goes through in the novel. As Karla Kovalova writes about Tashi's existence : “ Robbed of her physical wholeness ,being left with ,what Western medical doctors refer to ironically as a ‘ hole’, Tashi soon begins to



lose her mind as well : she suffers from recurring nightmares in which her repressed memory of her sister's death comes to haunt her ,screaming her pain into her ears.” (195) Tashi's sister Dura is already a victim of this practice .She dies due to the extra bleeding during the circumcision. As she herself narrates : “ I remembered my sister Dura's... my sister Dura's ...I could get no further .There was a boulder lodged in my throat. My heart surged pitifully. I knew what the boulder was ; that it was word; and that behind that word I would find my earliest emotions . Emotions that frightened me insane...” (78) Her sister Dura's death makes her aware of the evils of FGM. Earlier Tashi is seen as a follower of the tradition like others. She takes a decision to undergo the circumcision in order to follow the codes and conducts of the community. It shows her faith as well as her responsibility towards the African culture, As Gillespie observes: “She decides to have the operation as sign of defiance against colonial oppressors and as a marker of solidarity with the customs and traditions of her people.” (148) She thinks positively about the FGM tradition. She considers it as a mark of their identity. It makes clear that from earlier in the novel Tashi is in search if her identity. As she says : “ We had been stripped of everything but our black skins... these marks gave me courage. I wanted such mark for myself. (23) But later she comes to know about the evil effects of FGM upon her body. She faces problems during her pregnancy because of this FGM and as a result, she delivers a physically impaired baby. So Tashi becomes aggressive to take revenge against the practice of FGM which has destroyed her as well as her sister Dura's life. She thinks that killing M'Lissa will allow some release from her experiences. Her decision of killing M 'Lissa is a result of the understanding of her own body and her own self.

After marrying Adam Tashi goes to America .There she understands the reality behind FGM.It clearly shows that the difference in African and American culture is responsible for her mental trauma. Tashi faces difficulty while walking .She delivers a mentally retarded baby. She cannot make successful intercourse with her husband after the circumcision which results into their break up. As Tashi herself narrates about her physical condition after the circumcision “I am like a chicken bound for market. The scars on my face are nearly healed, but I must still fan the flies away. The flies that are attracted by the odor coming from my blood, eager to eat at the feast provided by my wounds.” (44) The novel gives horrible details of the woman who has undergone circumcision. The novel succinctly portrays the victimization of women due to the age-old customs. The novel subtly portrays the evil effects of rigid customs like genital mutilation on the psyche of women. Therefore being aware of the customs Walker stands against it and tries to educate men as well as women. The circumcision ceremony is nothing but a custom set by patriarchal social order, which tries to show male dominance over women. This system clearly shows the superiority of males over females. As Coello writes: “Female genital mutilation shows an attempt to confer an inferior status on women by branding them with this mark which diminishes them that they are only women inferior to men, that they even do not even have rights over their bodies.” (213) Walker has used FGM as a tool to signify gender discrimination in the African American



society. As she writes in the novel: “We must keep ourselves clean and pure as we had been since time immemorial by cutting out unclean part of our bodies. Everybody knew that if woman is not circumcised, her unclean parts would grow so long that they’d soon touch her thighs. She would become masculine and arouse herself. (112-113) It is worthwhile to mention Thiam’s views about black women’s victimization here. As she writes : “The black woman’s sufferings are greater than those of men, for she is not only faced with white racism, the exploitation of race by the colonial, but also the domination that men, blacks as well as whites exercise over her by virtue of the patriarchal system in which both live.(116) The study of the Possessing the Secret of Joy clearly shows the victimization of women on account of gender and their helplessness due to the rigidity of social norms and culture.

As Oana Cogeanu observes the degradation of the female protagonist Tashi and the disintegration of her female body on the account of FGM : “In fact, the novel a emphatic and consistent focus on death and suicide as means of escape from what the protagonist perceives as a dead-end situation : “Tashi’s (absent) flesh continues to dominate the novel and parallels the lifelessness of Tashi’s post-excision existence.” (59-60)Walker has realistically portrayed the experience of a circumcised woman in the novel. Tashi who faces endless problems after the circumcision. She even cannot pee properly. She takes more time for this act .later her personal life with her husband is also destructed on the account of her fragmented body which cannot fulfill her husband’s sexual demands who later finds solace in the company of his Mistress Lisette. Tashi who delivers a mentally challenged boy child to whom she really does not love due to her long illness. Thus, Tashi’s life as a woman, as a mother is destroyed on the account of FGM which is a tool of male patriarchy to kill women’s sexuality. Here Walker highlights woman’s demand for living a life free of physical tortures. As Opal Moore comments: “Alice Walker tells true story of Tashi, an Olinka woman tortured in her efforts to reconcile the demands of the self with the desire to belong to a people, a culture and a tradition.” (234) Tashi previously thinks circumcision as a mark and identity of Olinka .Even she feels pride for it. But when she becomes aware of its evil consequences she stands against this brutal practice. As Meena Kumari rightly asserts: “Most of the leading characters in Walker's fiction indulge in acts of aggression against repressive forces to revive back their honor and autonomy.” (149)

Similarly, Arun Joshi portrays the dilemma of human existence in his The Foreigner. Dr.Seema Raizada write about existentialism in the article “Existentialism in Arun Joshi’s Novels” : “The basic theory of existentialism is an insistence on the actual existence of the individual as the basic and important fact, instead of a reliance on the theories of abstractions. The central doctrine is that man is what he makes of himself; he is not predestines by a God or by society, or by biology.”(01)The Foreigner tries to narrate the essential nature of human existence. In Walker’s Possessing the Secret of Joy the women face the problem of existence due to the practice of female genital mutilation whereas there is no such outside agency in



The Foreigner responsible for the existential crisis of the characters. But still the character faces the dilemma of the problem of existence. As Kavita Yadav writes about the existence of Sindhi Oberoi the protagonist of *The Foreigner* : “Deprived of parental love and affection in his very childhood, he becomes broken anchorless. With the death of his uncle, who brought him up in the absence of his parents, Sindi has lost his emotional anchor forever.”(261) The novel narrates the life journey of the male protagonist Sindi Oberoi, a man born of Kenyan-Indian father and English mother. His parents died in a plane crash near Cairo and Sindi becomes an orphaned at the age of four. There is similarity in Walker’s Tashi and Dura’s sufferings and that of Joshi’s Sindi.They all are deprived of parental love and care .In the very opening pages of the novel Tashi is observed as crying. But her parents don’t bother about it. Her mother Catherine ,herself is a victim of male patriarchy is ready for Tashi’s circumcision.Joshi’s Sindi also lacks emotional nourishment which later results into existential crisis.

Sindi’s life journey shows him as one of the strugglers. He works as a dishwasher and barman at Saho then moves to Scotland where he works at a small village library and discusses religion, God and mysticism with a Catholic Priest .He studies in Boston where he meets June and Babu.Finally he comes to Delhi and settles down but finds his existence meaningless in the alien country. As he says: “ I was considered quite a misfit.” Here Joshi wants to highlight the alienation and meaninglessness of human being. R.S Pathak has expressed this in the following lines: “Alienation is one of the greatest problems confronting modern man. Its corrosive impact can be seen in the form of generation gap, the anti war movement, the hippie phenomenon, the credibility gap.....and so on. “ (68)

Arun Joshi in *The Foreigner* aptly observes the alienation of Sindi Oberoi which later results into his existential agonies and sufferings. In the novel Sindi says: “My foreign background stood against me.” It shows his psychological trauma in the strange land. Arun Joshi has portrayed Sindi as a man who believes in the theory of detachment. But with advent of the female friend, June his idea of detachment is shattered. Sindi’s philosophy of detachment upsets June and she finds a companion in Babu, a young Indian student. Both are supposed to be married but unfortunately both get separated on the account of Sindi’s physical relationship with June. Seeing her in depression he just consoles her through lovemaking, which later resulted into the breakdown of her marriage with Babu.Babu who finds himself unable to understand the situation at last commits suicide. June too dies later since she is left behind by both Sindi as well as Babu. Sindi’s false concept of detachment is responsible for her as well as Babu’s death. Thereafter, Sindi decides to leave America and comes to India where he settles down. His shifting from America to India is very significant as per his self – realization is concerned. As Kavita Yadav comments: “The rootless Sindi finds a direction and purpose of life. He is not alienated from the society but from himself. Shuttling between attachment and detachment; love and hate; participation and withdrawal; he finally settles



down in India fro he truly belongs to it. From a life of alienation in America and England, he moves to a life of identification in India.” (263)

There is similarity in the depiction of existential sufferings by both of the novelists .The characters are trapped into the existential dilemmas and they line their life in conflict, anxieties and depression. Tashi too feels helpless like Joshi’s June when her husband Adam starts meeting one French woman Lisette. Since she cannot fulfillment the sexual urges of her husband on the account of her circumcision he finds out another substitute in Lisette. Tashi lives her life in Trauma on this betrayal like June in *The Foreigner*. Tashi’s existential suffering takes a high toll on her when she delivers a mentally retarded child. The female circumcision has crippled her marriage as well as motherhood. At last she decides to kill the real culprit behind her bad fortune i.e M Lissa. In Arun Joshi’s *The Foreigner* too the characters Sindi ,Babu and June live in a state of mental trauma. Sindi tries to find out his roots in when he finds himself nowhere. It is an existential dilemma in the work of the people who become the victims of identity crisis. His failure in his love relationship with his female friend, June on the ground of his philosophy of detachment .June too feels suffocated her relationship with Sindi as well as Babu to whom she loves and wants to marry. However her physical relationship with Sindi gives her sense of guilt and existential anxiety. Babu becomes an ultimate victim of the love relationship of Sindi and June and commits suicide. Thus ,Arun Joshi has done a wonderful attempt in the portrayal of human existential sufferings where the human beings are trapped in the mental trauma and anxiety.

Thus, Walker and Josh similarly portray the problem of existence in their respective novels. The study of these novels is very significant today in the 21st century where human existence has become futile. People in this century are facing the problems of existence .They don’t know the purpose of their life like Walker’s Tashi’s Catherine ,Tashi ,M Lisa and Dura and Joshi’s Sindi ,June and Babu.If they had known the value of their life they would not have behaved in this way. Therefore the attempt of the respective novelists is not only portray the existential sufferings of human beings but also they want to correct the behavior of the people in order to avoid existential crisis.

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