WALKER'S M'LISSA VERSUS DICKENS'MRS. GAMP

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Rites and rituals have always been a part of a culture, ever since history. One main reason for this can be explained by the fact that people have always feared the unknown. Why are we on earth? Is there a life after death? How can we explain conception and birth? These questions have been asked for centuries without a definite answer. Because of their monthly cycles and birth, women have always been connected with the regenerative quality of nature; hence the spiritual world, the world of the occult, magic and rituals have been the domain of women more than the man. Due to their spiritual nature, women were always considered powerful in this field.

You learn a lot about a country from its rituals: they relate the whole spiritual content of a country that makes it: special, unique. Rituals can be defined as the non-verbal attempts to express the wonder and awe in facing the unknown. Alice Walker is one author who believes that rituals form a gateway to understanding the culture and spiritual aspect of a group of people. Her work abounds in images reflecting the cultural richness, sounds and colour of the African race. Walker, besides telling about the colourful handicrafts of the people, also without discrimination tells of the seamy and dark side of the African rituals.

Possessing the Secret of Joy is a novel about one practice representing the dark side of a ritual:the practice of female mutilation. One common characteristic of such rituals is that people don't want to talk about it; but Alice Walker wants to discuss the issue. In fact she believes that unless people can face and understand the reason behind the persistence of such a ritual, black people can not be really free. They must be ready to accept the bad along with the good. In every race there are the good and the bad cultural practices. One mustn't flinch from facing these.

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M'Lissa is a character from the novel who performs the rite of female mutilation. She had been mutilated in her day and that's why she dragged her foot . She had circumcised many female children and had left them tortured and bleeding in the initiation hut, maimed for life. Can we blame Tashi for having female circumcision? Can we blame M'Lissa for performing it? Why do people cling to these rituals some of them monstrous? In the novel ***Possessing The Secret of Joy***, we try to find answers to some of these questions. We meet Tashi, whom we had been introduced in ***The Color Purple***. Tashi is bicultural. She does not know where she belongs. Is she African or American? Because she feels an outsider in America, by having female circumcision, she thinks she can belong with the Olinka community, be like other Olinka women. "It is a way the Olinka women can show the man that they still have their own ways, even though the white man has taken everything else. "(Walker 22) Olivia , another character from the book,says.
In the face of the unknown always people wanted to believe in something, an idea, or view of life that continued or existed when everything else changed. Tashi states: "all I care about is the struggle of our people"(Walker,22). Tashi feels that sometimes to cling to the rituals is the only dignity left for the black people. Tashi, in love with Adam, does not know exactly what she is seeking. She feels different but at the same time wants to be part of the Olinka female society

The interesting technique Walker uses in this novel is to make different characters recount the story:Adam, Tashi, Olivia, Benny and Lissette(Adam's French wife)and M'Lissa each tell the story from a different angle .The use of this technique by Alice Walker allows the reader to form their own views about the events described. The author stresses the bicultural identity of Tashi by naming her sometimes Tashi sometimes Evelyn (her American identity) and sometimes Tashi –Evelyn or Mrs. Johnson .M'Lissa says: "The very first day she came I could see my death in Tashi's eyes, as clearly as if I as looking into a mirror. Those eyes that are the eyes of a madwoman. Can she really think I have not seen madness and murderers before?"(Walker,209) M'Lissa tries to clear up the point. She says that in her family women had always been "tsunga". When M'Lissa asks why this has been so her mother answers saying this is an honour. When it was the turn for M'Lissa to be circumcised, her mother tried to avoid doing real harm to her daughter. She could not bring herself to really mutilate her daughter; but other women saw and what she left unfinished, the witchdoctor finished. M'Lissa says: "The child who left the

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initiation hut was not the one who went into it."(Walker 222) She adds: "I have been strong. This is what I tell the tourists who come to see me. …Dragging my half-body where half a body was needed, in service to tradition, to what makes us a people. "(226)

The stitching of the vagina, the scraping of the vulva and female circumcision were common practices in the Olinka village. Most of these women, because of the wound's not healing completely and also through infection, were maimed for life.

The novel's subject is suffering and the breaking of taboos. Why did Walker write such a novel? It is because she believed that in order to really understand a nation; we should go deep into the culture that constitutes it. The author believes that there should be no taboos in a nation. For centuries women have suffered in silence. Especially in Africa they did not have control over their bodies. Walker believed that time had come for the women to bring these out in the open. She believed it was her duty as a writer to write about these unmentioned practices. Why do people cling to their rites and rituals in a rapidly changing world? I think one main reason may be the fact that they believe it is these practices that form a strong bond between the members of a nation. . In case of the Olinka people in Africa their land has been taken away from them and the only thing remaining for them is their culture, their jobs, livelihood. But when you try to keep your culture alive, you can not make a distinction. The bad is preserved along with the good. Tashi suffers because of her biculturilism. She feels an outsider both in America and Olinka. Maybe by having female mutilation she thinks she can belong with the Olinka people. She forgets that American belief in the freedom of the body and mind has been deeply rooted in her being. She can not become an Olinka woman just by accepting bodily mutilation. Tashi continues to suffer more than ever .When Adam, her American husband, comes to rescue her, he finds her lying on a dirty mat bleeding and flies circling on her face and genital wounds. After this incident, Tashi changes completely: She becomes slower, and walking becomes very painful for her. " 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…cramps caused by the near impossibility of flow passing through so tiny an aperture. As M'Lissa had left after fasting together the raw side of Tashi's vagina with a couple of thorns and inserting a straw so that in healing the traumatised flesh might not grow together, shutting the opening completely."(Walker 65) "This is too difficult to contemplate, but it exists and

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we can not close our eyes to it. "says Walker.She believes that it is only by speaking out, sharing it that they can be saved now.

The book has been criticised because it deals with the women problem but does not question men's actions. Adam has a French lover to whom he tells everything about his association with Tashi. In contrast to Albert of ***The Color Purple*** Adam, is presented as a kind and caring man. Walker does not question Adam's fidelity to Tashi.

When Tashi learns that her sister Dura, who had haemophilia had died because of loss of blood at the hands of M'Lissa, she decides to go back to Olinka and kill her. She succeeds in doing this and is condemned to death .Tashi says that she does not feel any apprehension because she feels she had been dead since the day of her circumcision anyway. In fact she states that after remembering what had happened to her , for the first time , she feels a real, whole woman.

Mrs.Gamp is a superb creation of Dickens, from his novel***: Martin Chuzlewutt***, presiding over the rituals of life and death. As Steven Marcus says: "She is a guardian of human destiny"(Marcus 115). With Mrs. Gamp, in contrast to Walker's M'lissa, Dickens has created an interesting portrait. It is a comical portrait, but also through comedy, bitter truths are reflected. Mrs. Betsy Prigg is a fellow nurse friend of Mrs. Gamp. After working together for some time, in the same house Mrs.Gamp leaves with these words: "Wishing you lots of sickness, my darling creetur. 'Mrs.Gamp observed, 'and good places. It won't be long, I hope, afore we works together, off and on, again, Betsy; and may our next meeting 'be at a large family's, where they all takes it reg'lar,one from another, turn and turn about, and has it business-like. '(Dickens 401)

Mrs. Gamp is a character called at times of crises, at births and deaths. She knows her business very well and changes her appearance accordingly. Dickens describes her with the words: "Mrs Gamp who had a face for all occasions looked out of the window with her mourning countenance and said. 'She would be down directly'."(Dickens 268) "Like most persons who have attained great eminence in their profession she took to hers very kindly; in so much, that setting aside her natural predilection as a woman, she went to a lying in and lying out with equal zest and relish." (Dickens 269)

Dickens himself believed he had created someone unique with the character of Gamp. While he was staying in Finchley Dickens had created the character of Mrs.Gamp. He had asked his friend, Foster's view on this issue, saying: "Tell me what you think of Mrs. Gamp You'll not find easy to get

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through hundreds of misprints in her conversation, but I want your opinion at once…I mean to make a mark with her.(Johnson 457.)

Dickens believed that in America there was a big void;that the Americans had a public and a private face. He shared the feelings of Hilles Miller who expressed his views saying: "America is the country where all conventions and traditions have been destroyed for the sake of the free development of the individual, could for that very reason become, and was becoming a country where authentic individuality was impossible. (Miller, Dickens ***The World of His Novels*** 130)

When we compare these two characters we find that although they are from different cultural backgrounds and from different centuries, they have got many things in common. Both suffer from a terrible loneliness. They are completely isolated in the world they have created. They are both egoists, selfish and mercenary.

Mrs Gamp represents an extreme case of loneliness. She has elaborated her internal monologue to such a degree that she has created an imaginary being, Mrs. Harris, who justifies her behaviour. In her talks, Mrs. Gamp continuously quotes from this mysterious being especially in cases where she is bragging about the excellence of the job she is doing or giving her frequent speeches about her distaste for money. Other than money, Mrs. Gamp is devoted to her drink and food; in fact she thinks gossip may be spreading about her habit of drinking. However, at times like these, devoted Mrs. Harris comes to her aid. Supposedly she says to Mrs.Gamp "If ever there was a sober creature to be got at eighteen pence a day for working people, and three and six for gentlefox – night watching being an extra charge- you are that invaluable person."(Dickens 19)

M'Lissa in contrast performs this deed for the sense of power it gives her. She is not concerned about money. Both Mrs.Gamp and M'Lissa feel themselves as powerful figures presiding over men's destinies. M'Lissa says that in order to do her important job properly she learned not to feel. She says: " Can you imagine the life of the *tsunga* who feels?I learned not to feel.You can learn not to. In this I was like my grandmother;who was so callous people called her ' I Am a Belly'She would circumcise the children and demand food immediately after;even if the child still screamed.For my mother it was a torture."(Walker 22O) Mrs. Gamp had long been separated from Mr. Gamp because of differences of opinion about drinking. There was a rumour going on

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that Mrs. Gamp had disposed of her husband's remains for the benefit of scientific research.

Dickens' draws Mrs.Gamp's portrait with an ironical touch. Her belongings: shawl, bonnet and umbrella are presented as having lives of their own: " The umbrella with the circular patch was particularly hard to be got rid of, and several times thrust out its battered brass nozzle from improper crevices and chinks, to the great terror of the other passengers"(Dickens 268.)

Both M'Lissa and Mrs. Gamp are complete egotists. They live in the world they have created. They don't care anything about the people to whom they perform these rituals. Mrs.Gamp does not care anything for the people she is taking care of; but she says. "I could afford to lay all my fellow creatures out for nothing, I would gladly do it, such is the love I bears them."(Dickens 270) When attending a sick young man, she arranges his arms to see how he would look as a corpse.

M'Lissa had talked to all the women in Olinka saying that if they did not have this operation they would be like a loose shoe. Men did not like such women. She said it was unseemly, unclean. But Tashi says "you did not say anything about the woman, did you M'Lissa? About the pleasure she might have. Or the suffering."(Walker 224)

Possessing The Secret of Joy is a journey into self; into the political, social gendered self. In this book, Walker questions the culture that maims thousands of African women but at the same time does not allow them to talk about it. Tashi does not posses a unified vision of self because of her biculturalism. Tashi confronts her divided self, and her going back to Olinka and having female circumcision is a step on the way to this confrontation. By going back to Olinka ,Tashi will face the unspeakable. She had always blocked her memory on the case of her sister Dura's death. Now she remembers. She remembers the shrieks of her sister and women telling her that she mustn't cry.

One important characteristic of rituals is repetition. However can we repeat an action exactly? In order to understand the role of repetition in rituals we can view the two alternative explanation of rituals by J.Hillis Miller in his book: ***Fiction And Repetition*** .Miller draws attention to Deleuze opposing Nietzsce's concept of repetition to Plato's: "only that which resembles itself differ." "Only differences resemble one another."(Miller ***Fiction And Repetition*** 5) Nietzschean mode of repetition presents a world based on difference. Each thing is different from the other. In the repetition of an event , memory is important. Walter Benjamin draws attention to two kinds of

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memory: day time and night memory. During daytime, our memory constructs a rational recurrence of events. At night, in close parallel to Freud's theories, dreams construct a different form of repetition. The memory creates a fictional world not resembling the original set of actions or events.(Miller ***Fiction and Repetition*** 8)

In case of Tashi, there has always been a fear of her own blood and injuring herself but she doesn't remember why she feels this way. The memory blocks the original event that had caused this fear. One day as Tashi is watching a film shown by the Old Man about a group of young children lying on the ground, suddenly a cock enters the scene., Tashi feels terrible and faints. After recovering herself, she starts to paint cocks of all sizes. Few days later, in the corner of the picture, a large foot appears. At first, Tashi doesn't recognise whether the foot belongs to a man or a woman. Then a veil lifts in her mind and she remembers that it was M'Lissa who was the person in the picture and she had thrown something in her hands to the hen, a piece of human flesh. The blood symbolised this event which Tashi tried to forget.

Tashi, when she talks with Raye, the psychologist, reflects Nitsche's views of repetition in the case of this ritual. The psychologist asks Tashi whether the same thing is done to every woman? Tashi answers that it is the same and yet different. She says: "Always different, I would think, I said, exhaling breath, because women are all different. Yet always the same, because women's bodies are the same."(Walker 120)

As the case with many rituals there will always be those who defend the most harmful rituals. In the case of Mrs.Gamp, because she has a reputation of being one of the best in her profession, the people who call her for the rituals of birth and death feel content that they have done the best thing for their relations. In the ritual of female circumcision, it is interesting to note that Diane C. Menya says: "A subject that must be viewed in the cultural context. In Africa, the actual cutting is only a part of a rite that young people go through to be initiated into adulthood. During the initiation period, the secrets of their society are revealed to them and they are taught acceptable social and sexual behaviour. The process is a means of protecting the society from pre and extra marital sex, out of wedlock pregnancies and sexually transmitted disease. Alice Walker is silent on these positive aspects as if mentioning them might lend a degree of respectability to the abhorrent practice of female of genital mutilation." (Menya,Diana C., 1993 : 2)

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Gloria Steinham in a penal discussion about female mutilation discusses the issue from a different angle and says that there are similarities between this practice and unnecessary caesarean births, certain mesectomies and abortions for unwanted pregnancies in the west.

Walker also creates three alternative myths about the spread of the fatal epidemic: Aids in her novel. Adam says that the spread of this disease in Africa was caused because the scientists saw the black people as tools in an experiment and had infected the people by injecting them with a contaminated vaccine against polio. One dying student says that he had heard a rumour that the disease was caught from green monkey's teeth. Tashi, however, is convinced that little girls and women are dying because of the unwashed, dirty, unsterilized sharp stones, tin tops, bits of glass, rusty razors and grungy knives used by the Tsunga.

We are living in a rapidly changing world. New discoveries, advanced forms of communication have helped abolish national and cultural boundaries. However one thing has remained unchanged: still our reason for being on earth and the meaning of life are unsolved dilemmas. I believe that as long as people will stay in awe of the mystery of life, there will be rites and rituals to express this united feeling in the face of the unknown. Rituals will always remain to express the silent communion of people from divers cultures and locations. It will be their tribute to life. Rituals give us a key to understanding people of different cultures and backgrounds but they must always be viewed in their cultural context; it is the only way we can really understand and arrive at a just assessment of them.

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