

**Self-Harm as Biosocial Disorder in Alice Walker's
*Possessing the Secret of Joy***

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Abstract

This paper investigates, from a psychological perspective, the personality disorder of Tashi, the African protagonist of the novel, in the face of an invalidating and impeding African community that suppresses her growth towards womanhood and wholeness. In the light of Biosocial Theory, This psychological reading of Walker's novel suggests that Tashi's emotional dysregulation and sense of self dysfunction are the natural outcomes of her traumatic childhood experience. This traumatic childhood experience foreshadows Tashi's Borderline Personality Disorder in adulthood and her subsequent behaviour of rage and even self-harm. Tashi, as a borderline, frequently experiences severe episodes of anger, anxiety and deliberate self-harm behavior. This new reading of Walker's novel is not only meant to extend the argument regarding the cruelty of female genital mutilation, but also it divulges the inner workings of Tashi's mind and analyses her pattern of behaviour in order to pinpoint how Tashi's BPD results in impulsive actions and frequent problems in relationships, and how psychotherapy plays a vital role in treating Tashi's Borderline Personality Disorder.

Keywords: Self-Harm, Biosocial Theory, BPD, Alice Walker, Tashi, *Possessing the Secret of Joy*

1. Introduction

Alice Walker's *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992) has been one of the most controversial novels. It is the final novel of Alice Walker's African trilogy, *The Color Purple* (1982) and *The Temple of My Familiar* (1989). In this revolutionary novel, Walker adopts a completely unfamiliar position towards the African heritage by condemning the tradition of female genital mutilation and its agents. Many previous studies have tackled the novel from different perspectives. For instances, Alyson R. Buckman's "The Body as a Site of Colonization: Alice Walker's *Possessing the Secret of Joy*" (1995), Angeletta KM Gouridine's "Postmodern ethnography and the womanist mission: Postcolonial sensibilities in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*" (1996), Nontsasa Nako's "Possessing the Voice of The Other: African Women and the 'Crisis of Representation' In Alice Walker's *Possessing the Secret of Joy*" (2001), Oana Cogeanu's "Inscriptions on the African Body: Alice Walker's *Possessing the Secret of Joy*" (2011), and V Abirami, M Leelavathi's "The Secret Murder of Joy: An Ecofeministic Study on Alice Walker's *Possessing the Secret of Joy*" (2016). Most of these studies tend to consider the novel as a revolutionary manifesto that seeks to dismantle various systems of domination. Relying on Marsha Linehan's Biosocial

Theory, this paper shifts the course of the argument through divulging the secrets of Tashi's mind in an attempt to clarify why she chooses self harm, which can be read as a biosocial disorder when it comes to Tashi's case, to express her indictment against the status quo. The researcher will show how Tashi's heightened sensitivity increases her emotional intensity (emotional dysregulation or *bio*), and how her personal problems determine her choices and the mechanisms she adopts (self dysfunction or *social*).

2. Self-Harm in Biosocial Theory

The idea of self harm has generated much controversy in literature and psychology with regard to its motivations and interpretations. In Psychology, the syndrome of deliberate self-harm is defined as:

Conscious and willful inflicting of painful, destructive, or injurious acts on one's own body without intent to kill... It probably occurs most often in borderline or schizophrenic patients, in order to (1) relieve feelings of depersonalization; (2) lessen inner tensions; (3) solve genital conflicts' (4) reassure the subject that he or she is alive by seeing his own blood; (5) deny inability to control the body by planning its destruction. (Bhatia, 2009, p. 405)

Moreover, Mcallister (2003) defines the term as "any act that causes psychological or physical harm to the self without a suicide intention, and which is either intentional, accidental, committed through ignorance, apathy or poor judgement" (p. 178). Mcallister further maintains that self injury is a kind of self harm which leads to direct and bodily injury such as "cutting, burning, scalding and injurious insertion of objects into the body" (p. 178). The notion of self-harm in biosocial theory is first introduced by Marsha Linehan in her book *Cognitive-Behavioral Treatment of Borderline Personality Disorder* (1993). Linehan (1993) identifies BPD as an emotional dysregulation that happens to individuals with biological vulnerabilities and certain environmental influences. This results in specific impulsive patterns of behavior such as self-injurious and non-suicidal behaviors. Linehan considers self-harm as a biosocial disorder. First, it is biological since it is caused by increased emotional intensity (emotional dysregulation) that may have been due to traumatic childhood experience or a sense of self dysfunction. Second, it is social because it is aroused and stimulated by the individual's maladaptive coping mechanisms (social dysfunction) with his/her emotional dysregulation and environment. Linehan believes that this social dysfunction can result from the social environment's attempted invalidation of an individual's life experiences when his/her private

experiences are not believed or played down. In this entanglement, the individual can neither leave his/her environment nor remain in it since it is invalidating. Even when he/she resorts to self harm as a way to assert his/her true identity or express indictment, his/her reaction is invalidated again. This is because societies do not accept deliberate self-harm mechanisms and expect its members to recover from memories of trauma and to get on with their communities.

Apparently, the individuals with BPD can turn to self harm because they lead an extremely painful life in which they feel humiliated and ugly. Linehan's Biosocial Theory of the Causes of BPD asserts that the causes of this disorder (biological, social or both) are often beyond the individual's control. Biological causes of BPD comprise emotional vulnerability which means that the individual's sympathetic nervous system can be easily provoked by emotions. This results in severe responses in his/her body, and it usually takes a long time for the body to return to its normal state. Biological causes of BPD also result from difficulties in emotional modulation; that is when the individual finds him/herself vulnerable while responding to strong emotions. Social causes include "the invalidating environment" in which the individual lives and interacts; an environment that invalidates every inner experience of the individual. Linehan maintains that "people in a particular environment may act in a manner that is stressful to an individual" (p. 40). These invalidating environments "contribute to the development of emotion dysregulation; they also fail to teach the child how to label and regulate arousal, how to tolerate emotional distress" (Linehan, 1993, p. 42). The invalidation process occurs when the individual's preferences and beliefs are not taken seriously, when his/her experiences are trivialized, when his/her emotions are considered as unimportant, or when he/she is discriminated against or physically or sexually abused. As children, most borderlines in invalidating environments have gone through a certain form of childhood trauma; whether sexual or physical abuse, or loss of a close relative. Consequently, borderlines are usually characterized by intensity of emotional reactivity and lack of proper emotional expression. As adults, borderlines "tend to invalidate their own emotional experiences, look to others for accurate reflections of external reality" (Linehan, 1993, p. 42). Borderlines often behave in harmful social manners because they did not learn how to properly react to negative emotions, and this leads to self-destructive pattern of behavior which adopts self harm as a way to express dissatisfaction or assert one's identity.

Linehan (1993) highlights six behavioral patterns of borderlines that may lead to self-harm as a reaction against invalidating environments: First, emotional vulnerability which is characterized by "difficulties in regulating negative emotions" (p. 10). Second, self-invalidation which is seen as "a tendency to invalidate or fail to recognize one's own emotional responses, thoughts, beliefs, and behaviors", and it "may include intense shame, self-hate, and self-directed anger" (p. 10). Third, unrelenting crises which Linehan sees as "a pattern of frequent, stressful, negative environmental events, disruptions, and roadblocks", and this is usually caused by the individual's dysfunctional lifestyle, others by an inadequate social milieu" (p. 10). Fourth, inhibited grieving which is a "tendency to inhibit and overcontrol negative emotional responses, especially those associated with grief and loss, including sadness, anger, guilt, shame, anxiety, and panic" (p. 10). Fifth, active passivity which means the borderline's "failure to engage actively in solving of own life problems, often together with active attempts to solicit problem solving from others in the environment; learned helplessness, hopelessness" (p. 10). Sixth, apparent competence by which Linehan means a "tendency for the individual to appear deceptively more competent than she actually is"; this is usually due to the individual's "failure to display adequate nonverbal cues of emotional distress" (p. 10). These are the important behavioral precursors that have to exist in an individual's life before he/she turns to self-harm as a reactive mechanism. Moreover, intentional self-harm is usually associated with "urge" which is "prior to engaging in the act, a period of preoccupation with the intended behavior that is difficult to resist", and it is also associated with "preoccupation" which is "thinking about self injury occurs frequently, even when it is not acted upon" (In-Albon, Bürli, Ruf, & Schmid, 2013, p. 2).

BPD has been frequently tackled in numerous literary works that have been written by remarkable authors. The recurring reference to borderlines can clearly be noticed in several works; usually the protagonist or one of the main characters. Some of these literary works succeed in picturing the emotional vulnerabilities and the invalidating families or environments that can produce individuals with that disorder. Alice Walker's *Possessing the Secret of Joy* is a dialectical novel that can be considered as an archetype in this respect.

3. Tashi's Biosocial Disorder

Walker's novel is an archetypical manifesto of childhood trauma which gets much worse as the African protagonist becomes an adult in a

hindering context. The novel can really be read as a world of violence and sadism. Tashi is rash and hysteric, but Walker clarifies that the circumstances have created her in that way. Tashi's BPD is mainly the outcome of her traumatic life events during childhood, and her unstable and hostile conflicts during her adult life. In her *Preface* to the novel, Walker affirms that "human beings do terrible things to each other" and draws the reader's attention to that "practice that affects over a hundred million women and girls, with more becoming its victim every day" (p. 9). She then admits the "wisdom and grace" of psychology represented by Carl Jung or Mzee in the novel; the old man "who tenderly begins to guide Tashi, the character who was mutilated, back to mental health" (p. xi).

3.1 Tashi's invalidating environment and childhood trauma.

Linehan (1993) proposes that "an invalidating environment is most likely to facilitate development of BPD" (p. 49). Tashi lives among an invalidating community that suppresses her growth towards womanhood. Linehan (1993) believes that an invalidating environment is one in which "the expression of private experiences is not validated; instead, it is often punished, and/or trivialized" (p. 49). Tashi's community is an invalidating one to the extent that "THEY DO NOT WANT to hear what their children suffer. They've made the telling of the suffering itself taboo" (p. 165). They live in an ivory tower, caring only about their lusts and neglecting the mental and psychological damage they cause their females to suffer. They have never bothered themselves to discuss visible signs of menstruation or signs of woman's mental power, absurdly enough, "for fear of corrupting the young" (p. 165). Or they are at times too fanatic to listen to any female complaints that might question an accepted tradition which they consecrate. M'Lissa summarizes the whole dilemma when she wonders "But who are we but torturers of children?" (p. 226).

Dura's death is Tashi's traumatic childhood experience in Africa when she suffers watching her beloved sister Dura bleeding to death during the ritual of FGM, without even having the right to cry out of pain, since "They were always saying *You mustn't cry!*" (p. 15). This traumatic experience has tormented Tashi who says about her dead sister: "She has been screaming in my ears since it happened" (p. 83). The incident is extremely painful since Tashi has witnessed it herself. Tashi narrates: "She'd simply died. She'd bled and bled and bled and then there was death. No one was responsible. No one to blame" (p. 83). Dura's death even affects M'Lissa, the cruel circumciser, who narrates her memory of the young girl saying: "She felt so betrayed. By everyone. They'd

severely beaten her mother as well, and she blamed herself for this... She's been crying since I left... She has been crying all our tears" (p. 225).

Bitterly enough, it is Tashi's mother herself who has helped to hold Dura down to the knife of the Olinkan circumciser M'Lissa; "She had just sunk into her role of 'She Who Prepares the Lambs for Slaughter'" (p. 275). After Dura's death, Tashi's becomes unable to express her emotional distress or her painful emotions which are utterly disregarded by her invalidating African community. This experience initiates her mental disorder and foreshadows Tashi's personality disorder in adulthood and her subsequent behaviour of rage and even self-harm. Linehan further illustrates that invalidating environments during childhood instigate borderlines' emotional dysregulation as these environments fail to teach the child "how to tolerate emotional distress" (p. 42). When Olivia first meets Tashi, she notices that it is difficult to ignore Tashi because although many sad faces many have greeted them, "she was the only person weeping. Yet she uttered not a sound" (p. 7). Together with her family, Olivia can easily observe Tashi's inhibited grieving and her feelings of sadness, anxiety and panic especially when "her little cropped head and reddened brown face bulged with the effort to control her emotions, and except for the tears, which were so plentiful they cascaded down her cheeks, she was successful" (p. 7).

Linehan further proceeds that an invalidating environment has two primary characteristics: First, "it tells the individual that she is wrong in both her description and her analyses of her own experiences, particularly in her views of what is causing her own emotions, beliefs, and actions" (p. 50). Olivia comments on such a rigid and invalidating environment saying: "Among the wealthy Olinkans there is widespread denial that anything is wrong" (p. 250). This is the invalidating dogma which the old Olinkans adopt and defend. They see everything as typical even if the AIDS epidemic is reaping thousands of Olinkan lives or even though thousands of Olinkan females are mentally and spiritually distorted by the cruel practices of FGM. This can be the reason why Tashi has been so fascinated during her visit to Zurich where "every slight wrong might be corrected, without much trouble" (p. 37). This invalidating philosophy has been in full control of Tashi's mentality just before she decides to undergo the ritual of FGM. The second primary characteristic of an invalidating environment, as stated by Linehan (1993), is that it attributes the experiences of its victims to unacceptable personality traits. According to this invalidating philosophy, these undesirable emotional

expressions can be attributed to "paranoia, a distorted view of events, or failure to adopt a positive attitude" (p. 50). Tashi's attitude is at all times refused by her own community not only because of inhibited grieving, but also because of her daydreaming which they always laugh at. During her recurring day dreams, the other children laugh at her saying: "Come see how Tashi has left our world. You can tell because her eyes have glazed over!" (p. 50). They have even persuaded her that she is a bit retarded, and later on in adulthood, M'Lissa, Tashi's victimizer and the symbol of such an invalidating doctrine, tells her: "You are mad, but you are not mad enough" (p. 257). Throughout the novel, Tashi's emotional expressions have not been regarded as valid responses to circumstances. Her emotionally invalidating community has been totally intolerant with her behavior since Dura's murder till her execution. Even the right to express her own emotional distress is not permitted in such a bigoted a narrow-minded community. Linehan (1993) refers to one of the patients in her research project who was forbidden to cry if she got hurt while playing. If she does, her parents give her a real reason to cry, and if she sheds any tears, her mother hits her. This is a reminder of Tashi's bleak existence in which "one crying child is the rotten apple in the barrel of the tribe" (p. 7). "It was a nightmare" (p. 15), as described by Tashi, a nightmarish world in which she is not allowed to speak of her sister, or to cry for her. The situation is even absurd when Olivia's father, the Pastor, asks about the crying Tashi. The Olinkan elders' reply is: "What little girl, Pastor? There is no little crying girl here" (p. 8). Tashi's inhibited grieving, fear and panic in that invalidating environment become a clear and continuous behavioral pattern during her childhood. Tashi's feeling of panic has overwhelmed her to the extent that if she cuts her finger or sees blood while playing, she falls into a panic, and for fear of injury, she has "even learned to sew in an exaggeratedly careful way, using two thimbles" (p. 8).

However, Tashi's invalidating community cannot see any justification for her constant crying. On the contrary, the other children keep teasing her about her crying. The elders are completely uncaring and indifferent even during Dura's murder when she "*cried piteously, her arms outstretched, looking about for help. No, they laughed, telling this story, not simply for help, for deliverance*" (p. 10). Tashi's frustration is even greater than her panic since nobody, not even her parents, has ever tried to leap to embrace the crying child in his/her arms. It seems that the Olinkan male-dominated society does not realize that they are killing these young females both physically and spiritually, and they strangely expect Tashi to recover from memories of trauma and to get on with her community.

They only pay considerable attention to their assumption that if she meets the outlanders in tears, this will bring bad luck to them.

In such an invalidating community, Tashi never learns to control her emotions and her emotional reactions or to tolerate distress. She never learns to trust her own emotional responses as reactions to the situational events she has passed through. Instead, she actively invalidates her own experiences when she decides to undergo the ritual, and after that to search her social environment for clues or interpretations for her mystery. Linehan (1993) comments on the situation of invalidated people saying: "People who are invalidated will usually either leave the invalidating environment", or they might "try to prove themselves valid and thereby to reduce the environment's invalidation of their environment" (p. 52). It is true that Tashi has left her invalidating environment when she immigrates to America; attempting to get rid of her environment's invalidation, relieve her feelings of depersonalization, lessen her inner tensions and prove herself valid in another validating environment. However, in America, Tashi cannot forget her community, nor can she forget the murder of her sister. Apparently, when Tashi decides to undergo the ritual of female genital mutilation, she only does so in order to meet her invalidating environment's expectations and to prove herself valid. The researcher believes that the natural consequence in such an invalidating community is a vast majority of emotionally vulnerable invalidated female borderlines. Interestingly enough, when M'Lissa, the female circumciser and the blind tool of male savagery and brutality, mentions her mother, she says: "She was a sad woman, my mother. I never saw her smile" (p. 221). It seems that M'Lissa's mother might be another Olinkan female borderline overwhelmed by inhibited grieving.

Linehan also pinpoints that "the prevalence of BPD among women requires that we examine the possible role of sexism in its etiology" (p. 52). Sexism has been a serious source of invalidation in Tashi's world. Prejudice and discrimination against women on the basis of sex are so prevalent in Walker's novel. The Olinkan leader, who has given his tribe good, correct and sensible instructions, orders his community from prison that all women must keep themselves clean and pure by cutting out unclean parts of their bodies. The Olinkan man-dominated society believes that "if a woman was not circumcised her unclean parts would grow so long 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 his way" (p. 121). This is the reason why Tashi willingly gives up sexual pleasure with her husband and undergoes the ritual; "To be

accepted as a real woman by the Olinka people; to stop the jeering" (p. 122). This severe invalidation weighs heavily on Tashi's mind and on most Olinkan women's. In all cultures, women by nature are known to be delicate, to love ornaments and embellishment and to admire whoever praises their beauty. It is an extremely harsh invalidation, not only to Tashi, but to all Olinkan women as well, to tyrannically convince them that uncircumcised women are loose and unclean, to domineeringly proclaim that "a proper woman must be cut and sewn to fit only her husband, whose pleasure depends on an opening it might take months, even years, to enlarge" (p. 224). The invalidation of the Olinkan male chauvinist community is more gross when they persuade the Olinkan females that cutting such unclean pieces out of their bodies is part and parcel of their traditions; it is even a religious ritual since "God liked it tight!... God liked it fighting!" (p. 238). Consequently and just to please God and their husbands, Olinkan women, after giving birth, immediately "come back to the *tsunga* to be re sewn, tighter than before. Because if it is loose he won't receive enough pleasure" (p.223-24). As a maladaptive coping mechanisms with this invalidation, Tashi puts her trust in their leader and considers him as Jesus Christ while he, such as most Olinkan men, is caring only about his sexual pleasure even if it leads to the nervous breakdown and personality disorder of many Olinkan females. Just to avoid the invalidation of such a sexist community, to lessen her inner tensions and to prove herself valid, Tashi decides to undergo the ritual. Otherwise, as she says, "I was never trusted, considered a potential traitor, even" (p. 122). This is how the Olinkan male supremacist invalidating community impairs Tashi and thousands of other African women whose assigned role is "to suffer, to die, and not know why" (p. 234).

3.2 Symptoms of biosocial disorder. Tashi clearly shows symptoms of BPD when she makes suicidal gestures. In the first interior monologue, she says "I did not realize for a long time that I was dead" (p. 3). In addition, she says "I myself have lived and died—in and out of the Waverly, in and out of my mind—many times" (p. 155). Emotional instability and boredom are frequently associated with individuals with BPD (Linehan, 1993), and Tashi's emotional dysregulation is clearly reflected in her monologues. She says: "I was bored to distraction" (p. 30) since she views her life as a monotonous one with "predictable and boring" daily habits (30). In addition, imagined estrangement and unstable self image are among the symptom checklist of BPD (Linehan, 1993). Tashi experiences such feelings as she says: "I had in my mind some outlandish, oversized image of myself" (p. 22). Furthermore, Tashi's

emotional vulnerability, characterized by her inability to regulate negative emotions, is clearly shown during her adult life. When she knows about Lisette's pregnancy with little Pierre, "she flew into a rage that subsided into a years-long deterioration and rancorous depression. She tried to kill herself. She spoke of murdering their son" (p. 127). Tashi cannot even regulate her negative feelings among Adam's friends. For instance, when Adam's friend says jokingly "Ah, Adam and Evelyn. How cute!", Tashi slaps him. Linehan also asserts the role of sleep in regulating emotional vulnerability. She says: "sleep has an important influence on regulating emotional vulnerability" (p. 60). Tashi often escapes her emotional vulnerability via sleep. Sleep which is described by Adam as "deep, coma-like sleeps that could last for days" (p. 76).

Linehan also clarifies that borderlines' inability to regulate negative emotions may sometimes be accompanied with violence or violent outbursts. Apparently, extreme anger and aggressive behaviors can easily be remarked in the daily practices of borderlines. This exactly what happens with Tashi whose mood is always intense and highly changeable. She says about herself:

I felt the violence rising in me with every encounter with the world outside my home. Even inside it I frequently and with little cause, *no* cause, boxed Benny's ears. If I made him squeal and cringe and look at me with eyes gone grave with love and incomprehension, I fancied I felt relief (p. 144).

When Pierre first visits Tashi in her residence in the America, she experiences a difficulty in regulating her negative emotions and welcomes him in the following way:

A large jagged stone, gray as grief, struck him just above the teeth. Blood spurted from his nose. I began to throw the stones as if, like Kali, I had a dozen arms, or as if my arms were a multiple catapult or a windmill. Stones rained upon him and upon the cab... I did not let up, but floated nearer, cradling an armful of stones (p. 145).

The poor young man is only saved by the taxi driver who catches him and drags him out of sight. Tashi "began to laugh, as the taxi disappeared down the street" (p. 145). She even kicks Pierre's luggage into the street.

Borderlines may view things in extremes as their interests and opinions of other people can change quickly. In Linehan's words, "borderline individuals are mood-dependent" (p. 126). These changing moods usually lead to unstable relationships. Tashi's relationship with Lisette is one of extreme hatred and extreme love. Although Tashi has never met Lisette, Lisette tries earnestly to know her, to visit her, to write her letters, to interest her in French cooking. Lisette even sends Tashi her son, but all is

in vain as Tashi puts it: "None of this is helpful" (p. 163). Tashi's feels relieved on learning of Lisette's illness, which is finally diagnosed as stomach cancer, and her subsequent death. She even refuses to let Adam talk about Lisette's final wish before death which is to permit Pierre to live with him. Only before Tashi's execution, her mood changes oppositely, she suddenly finds out that she misses Lisette and her letters. In a letter to dead Lisette, Tashi writes: "You and I will meet in heaven... If I had been able truly to understand that you would die, and cease to write to me and to exist, I would have paid better attention to you before you died" (p. 278).

Inhibited grieving, which is a behavioral pattern of individuals with borderline personality disorder, or Tashi's tendency to inhibit negative emotional associated with grief and loss are also prevalent since her childhood. Tashi herself also talks about such feelings saying: "I felt as if a whole other world of grief and disaster had just been dropped on my soul" (p. 266). Even Adam describes his earlier friendship with Tashi as "a friendship of shared sadness as well as passion" (p. 97). Furthermore, Linehan confirms that "the invalidating environment teaches the individual to look to others for behavioral solutions, instead of shaping individual problem-solving and decision-making skills" (p. 162). Tashi's active passivity disables her capacity to engage actively in solving her own problems, and she often solicits problem solving from others like Mzee (Karl Jung), Raye, Adam or Pierre. She is always in a terrible need for someone to solve the riddle of her life. Everything in Tashi's life becomes a mystery to her, even her own body. Tashi says: "My own body was a mystery to me" (p. 121). It is Pierre who manages finally to help Tashi solve such an enigma, or as Tashi says, "he continues to untangle the threads of mystery that kept me enmeshed" (p. 276).

Commenting on the contentions made by some theorists that "borderline individuals frequently lie" (p. 17), Linehan believes that borderlines frequently tend to interpret their behavior because of "their feelings of invalidation and of being misunderstood" (p. 17). This can be a good explanation to Tashi's deliberate lying since her early childhood. Fear of punishment (invalidation) impels her to invent stories to justify the mistakes that any child may commit. For instance, when her mother sends her to the village shop for matches which are a penny each, Tashi loses the pennies given to her and she justifies the situation claiming that a giant bird has frighteningly swooped down from the sky and stolen them. These symptoms of BPD, if put into account together with Tashi's imagined abandonment, her unstable relationships with others, her

unstable self-image and her impulsive behaviors, are all sure signs of Tashi's BPD that leads her to adopt self-harm as a reactive mechanism.

3.3 Tashi's drifting towards self-harm. Linehan frequently refers to self-harm as one of the possible consequences of BPD. Tashi's emotional dysregulation, caused by her childhood trauma and by her invalidating environment, makes her drift to self-harm. At the beginning, Tashi is not aware whether this happens intentionally or unintentionally, but, later on, she adopts self-harm to prove herself valid even if at the expense of her sexuality and mental health. During her encounter with Mzee, Tashi admits causing self-harm to herself. She says: "And then there had been a period when, if I cut myself, whether accidentally or on purpose, I didn't notice it" (p. 82). She immigrates to America attempting to seek mental relief and to escape the invalidating. Linehan affirms that when borderlines fail to achieve certain behavioral and emotional goals, their failure is usually "met with shame, extreme self-criticism, and self-punishment, including suicidal behavior" (p. 74). Tashi's failure to overcome her childhood trauma weighs heavily on her mind until she starts to experience shame and drift to self-harm. Adam describes Tashi's mental state saying: "Her mood was impatient, foul, as she tore the smaller drawings into bits and tore her hair as well" (p. 78). Adam also comments on Tashi's deteriorating state and her drifting to intentional self-harm saying:

AT FIRST SHE MERELY SPOKE about the strange compulsion she sometimes experienced of wanting to mutilate herself. Then one morning I woke to find the foot of our bed red with blood. Completely unaware of what she was doing, she said, and feeling nothing, she had sliced rings, bloody bracelets, or chains, around her ankles (p. 51).

Tashi's drifting to self-harm clearly shows how severe her personality disorder is. She adopts self-harm as a reaction to her extremely painful life experiences. After Dura's death, Tashi becomes emotionally vulnerable and her nervous system becomes easily provoked. This first results in specific mental responses such as frequent nightmares and daydreams. Then, she starts to blame her invalidating environment and to feel susceptible while responding to strong emotions. Her invalidating community reinforces her emotional dysregulation until she becomes completely unable to regulate negative emotions. Eventually, Tashi begins to behave in a harmful social manner because she has never learned how to tolerate negative feelings. Consequently, her heightened sensitivity leads her to self-harm as a syndrome of her BPD. Mzee comments on Tashi's deliberate choice of self-harm saying: "YOURS IS

THE PAIN of the careless carpenter who, with his hammer, bashes his own thumb" (p. 49).

Tashi decides to undergo the ritual of FGM despite her knowing that it is the same ritual which has killed her beloved sister. Her overwhelming grief arouses her anger, and her anger pushes her to commit a disastrous action; an obvious self-harm. She seeks to put an end to her community's invalidation and to prove herself a true valid Olinkan woman. When Olivia begs Tashi to reflect on and not to commit such a crime against herself, her son and Adam, Tashi refuses saying: "when I disobey you, the outsider, even if it is wrong, I am being what is left of myself" (p. 254). This is exactly what Linehan asserts when she states: "As adults, borderline individuals adopt the characteristics of the invalidating environment. Thus, they tend to invalidate their own emotional experiences" (p. 42). Tashi's emotional dysregulation turns against her own self when she invalidates her painful experience of the ritual and forces herself to undergo the ritual despite her knowing that it will lead to her spiritual and mental destruction. Tashi tries to justify her uncontrollable reactions. Apparently, she declares that she intends to go through the ritual as resistance to the influence of the colonizer and in loyalty to the customs and traditions of her own people, but she actually admits doing it "to stop the jeering" (p. 122). The severe traumatizing experience leaves Tashi fighting madness for the rest of her life, trying hopelessly to identify her own reality through psychotherapy.

Linehan maintains that "borderline patients often find it difficult to believe that they deserve anything other than punishment and pain. Indeed, a number report that they deserve to die" (p. 74). Such as Tashi's invalidating environment has taught her that transgressions from the desired behavioral patterns deserve punishment, Tashi invalidates her own emotional experience and decides to punish herself via undergoing the ritual of FGM. Although Tashi envisions the Olinkan women who have undergone the ritual and borne it as "strong, invincible. Completely woman. Completely African. Completely Olinka" (p. 64), this can simply be her own viewpoint regarding those who silently withstand, endure and survive that attempted mutilation of their femaleness. It is Tashi herself who scornfully summarizes the situation saying: "the assigned role of the African: to suffer, to die, and not know why" (p. 234). In a state of emotional dysregulation, depression, and angry, hostile, and easily irritable mood, Tashi decides to succumb to the knife of M'Lissa refusing to listen to Olivia while begging her not to ruin her life. "*Tashi didn't want to do it, but to make her people feel better, she's resigned*" (p. 12).

Tashi's desire to prove herself valid and to escape the invalidation blinds her eyes until she realizes the bitter truth immediately after the ritual. Only when Tashi is told by M'Lissa to stand up and walk a few steps, "she noticed her own proud walk had become a shuffle" (p. 65). The ritual devastates Tashi's mental, social and marital life; leaving her in utter despair and personality disorder:

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 odor, too, of soured blood (p. 65).

This hidden scar between Tashi's thin legs epitomizes her personality disorder in adulthood and ignites her desire for revenge when she realizes that her attempts to prove herself valid have ruined her entire life. It is true that the scar gives her the classic Olinka woman's walk, but in return, she remains for the rest of her life "hidden from human contact, virtually buried" (67).

3.4 The inevitability of killing M'Lissa.

Tashi thinks she can achieve a sense of relief after going through the brutal ceremony of FGM, or at least, she can prove herself a valid Olinkan woman. Unfortunately, the ritual exacerbates her personality disorder. In a state of BPD, Tashi remembers Adam's analysis of her mental state. She says "I am a tortured woman. Someone whose whole life was destroyed by the enactment of a ritual upon my body which I had not been equipped to understand" (p. 162). After undergoing the ritual, Tashi's BPD overpowers her to the extent that she cannot stop harming herself, and she cannot find any other safe environment in which she can restore to her mental health. Tashi says: "After all, pain was what *I* felt" (p. 177). In America, her mental torture has repeated day after day especially when she fails to experience sexual pleasure with Adam, and when she does, her pleasure shames her. Accordingly, Tashi decides to call on M'Lissa, but, this time, not to seek validation of her community. On the contrary, Tashi revisits M'Lissa in order to destroy the symbol of invalidation that causes Dura's murder and tortures Tashi and many other Olinkan girls. Instead of surrendering to her own inhibited grieving,

emotional dysregulation and sense of self dysfunction, Tashi chooses her own way of resistance.

Killing M'Lissa is an expected outcome to Tashi's deteriorated mental state. When Tashi arrives in America, she starts to re-evaluate her situation. Her soul has been dealt a mortal blow, and for the first time she realizes that her attempt to prove herself a valid Olinkan woman pushes her to succumb to a barbaric practice of self-mutilation. She learns from a Newsweek article that M'Lissa is still alive and becomes a national monument such as Florence Nightingale. Being aware that her personality disorder is mainly caused by her rigid community represented by M'Lissa, Tashi decides to mutilate M'Lissa who has been the cause of all her suffering. She blames M'Lissa for her deteriorating mental state and swears to kill her. Tashi says: "Each night I fingered the razors I kept concealed in the stuffing of my pillow, fantasizing her bloody demise. I swore I would mutilate her wrinkled body so much her own God wouldn't recognize her" (p. 195). Tashi kills M'Lissa because M'Lissa has exposed her to the futility of her fatal deed instead of encouraging Tashi's trust in her own decision making, or instead of giving any significance to the horrible act she has done "*to make her people feel better*" (p. 12). M'Lissa tells Tashi that she is the biggest fool for having undergone the cruel ritual, and on confronting M'Lissa that it is she who has encouraged Olinkan women to undergo this barbaric practice, M'Lissa replies "Do fools need encouragement?... They encourage themselves... women are too cowardly to look behind a smiling face. A man smiles and tells them they will look beautiful weeping, and they send for the knife" (p. 228). Tashi sacrifices everything when she decides to commit that intentional self-harm in order "To be accepted as a real woman by the Olinka people; to stop the jeering" (p. 122). Thus, on finding out the uselessness of what she has done, Tashi becomes completely frantic. She realizes that, even after that horrible deed, her actions are invalidated once again by her ruthless community.

Tashi also conceives M'Lissa's killing as the only possible way to restore her peace of mind since M'Lissa's ghost keeps haunting her. The dreadful memory of M'Lissa has a hold over Tashi's subconscious mind. One day, while Tashi is painting a design called "crazy road", she finds out that she is painting "the lower folds of one of M'Lissa's tattered wraps" (p. 75). This is followed by such appalling memories of Tashi's childhood trauma when she "had crept, hidden in the elephant grass, to the isolated hut from which came howls of pain and terror" (p. 73). Inside this hut, Dura has been tortured till death and her inhuman shrieks rent the air and chill

Tashi's heart. Tashi's knowledge that her intentional self-harm is irrevocable greatly torments her. The irrevocability of self-harm, as Linehan maintains, is what usually weighs heavily on the borderline's mind. She writes: "Cutting and burning, for example, cannot be undone; scars are permanent" (p. 127). Moreover, Tashi also suffers the consequences of her fatal deed when Benny, her baby, is born retarded because some vital part of his brain has crushed during his delivery. Tashi becomes no longer cheerful as if her soul has received a mortal blow. Her mental pressure impels her to view M'Lissa's killing as the only unavoidable way to overcome her dysfunctional self-image. Tashi feels that she has done the right thing by murdering M'Lissa. She is reassured on picturing that the little Olinkan girls will no longer die infected by the "unwashed, unsterilized sharp stones, tin tops, bits of glass, rusty razors and grungy knives used by the tsunga. Who might mutilate twenty children without cleaning her instrument" (p. 235). After Killing M'Lissa, Tashi begins to restore her peace of mind as she seems at the courtroom. Although she is convicted of murdering and sentenced to death, Tashi, for the first time, is in full control of her feelings and envisions herself as valid and acceptable.

4. About the Novel's Ending

Walker's ending of *Possessing the Secret of joy* has been so controversial, and there has been a bulk of reception to it since the novel's publication. Just before her execution, Tashi writes:

Dying now does not frighten me. The execution is to take place where this government has executed so many others, the soccer field. I will refuse the blindfold so that I can see far in all directions. I will concentrate on the beauty of one blue hill in the distance, and for me, that moment will be eternity.

Blessed be.

Tashi Evelyn Johnson

Reborn, soon to be Deceased (p. 279)

At the final moment of her death, Tashi declares that "I am beginning to reinhabit completely the body I long ago left" (p. 110). Tashi dies joyfully; her death liberates her soul and reunites her with her own self. Describing the scene before her execution, she says: "There is a roar as if the world cracked open and I flew inside. I am no more. And satisfied" (p. 281). Apparently, Tashi manages finally to conquer her emotional dysregulation, her personality disorder and restore her mental health.

One of the most effective ways in treating BPD is Mentalisation-based therapy (MBT). It is a long-term psychotherapy which is used widely to

treat BPD. Based on the fact that our mental states affect our behaviour, Gill McGauley (2017) defines Mentalisation as: "the process by which we interpret the actions of ourselves and others in terms of those underlying intentional states such as personal desires, needs, feelings, beliefs and reasons" (p. 100). Namely, mentalisation is the individual's capacity to reflect on his/her mental state and decisions. In *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, Tashi's psychotherapy via MBT is first initiated by Carl Jung or Mzee, continued later on by Raye and eventually finalized by Tashi herself. Mzee provides one-on-one treatment between him and Tashi. The frequent sessions with him help to teach Tashi how to effectively interact with others. Noticeably, Mzee follows the Mentalisation-based therapy (MBT) in dealing with Tashi's BPD. In this type of therapy, Mzee tries to teach Tashi how to reflect on her clashing relationships with others, how to control her intense emotions and self-destructive behavior. It is Mzee who keeps reminding Tashi to reflect on her previous deeds; he asks her "Are you better for having done it? ... Do you feel better in yourself?" (p. 82). In another session, he tells Tashi "YOURS IS THE PAIN of the careless carpenter who, with his hammer, bashes his own thumb" (p. 49) just to stimulate her to control her intense emotions and reduce self-destructive behaviors. Tashi does like Mzee, his features and his benign look. When Tashi and Adam tell him that he is their last hope, Mzee replies: "You yourselves are your last hope" (p. 53) in order to reinforce Tashi's feelings of self-confidence and enhance her understanding that the process of recovery from her disorder is a personal decision in the first place.

Some psychotherapists, such as Anthony W. Bateman and Peter Fonagy, regard the failure of mentalisation as the core pathology of BPD (Bateman & Fonagy, 2006). Throughout the novel, Tashi has a poor capacity to mentalise her behaviour and decisions. She lacks the ability to examine her own thoughts and beliefs and to assess whether they are realistic or not. This is primarily because of her traumatic childhood which has impaired her capacity to mentalise. When she has the urge to self-harm and then fulfills that, she does not question herself nor does she reject the idea. McGauley (2017) clarifies: "Trauma, maltreatment and exposure to violence, disorganise the attachment system, disrupt the development of mentalisation and compromise affect regulation" (p. 101). Through MBT, Tashi succeeds in mentalising her deeds, learning to step back from her negative thoughts and examining her notions' validity. Instead of going on self-harm, Tashi manages to mentalise her dilemma despite the fact that she is sentenced to death. Her belief in herself as valid and her resistance to her annihilating and invalidating community

have brought her the secret of joy. By means of MBT, Tashi overcomes her BPD and demonstrates an exceptional courage in refusing to be submissive to a rigid mentality which has stifled and mutilated the Olinkan females' sense of womanhood for long. Her death has thus saved thousands of other Olinkan women who are liable to BPD and mental disorders, and who will no longer survive the torture of emotional dysregulation and sense of self dysfunction day after day. In spite of her execution and physical death, Tashi does overcome BPD and experience a spiritual and mental rebirth.

5. Conclusion

In *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, Walker examined how invalidating environments could create emotionally instable individuals with emotional dysregulation and sense of self dysfunction. Tashi's Borderline Personality Disorder, instigated by her rigid invalidating community, was observed clearly through her volatile intense relationships, her inability to regulate negative emotions, her impulsiveness and repeated mood swings, her fear of abandonment and her distorted self-image. Tashi's mental disorder was also proved via her daydreaming and loss of contact with reality, her risky behavior and drifting to intentional self-harm, her swinging mood and irritability and her intense anger and violent reactions. The novel showed the rapid changes in Tashi's identity and self-image and how goals shifted strangely due to her Borderline Personality Disorder. She first sought to escape the invalidation of her community via undergoing the ritual which once murdered her beloved sister. After that, she conceived killing M'Lissa, the cruel circumciser, as the only possible way to prove herself valid. Briefly, Tashi's story was simply one of disorder and mentalisation, and only through mentalisation, she could lessen inner tensions, confront her invalidating community, relieve her feelings of depersonalization, alleviate her tortured consciousness over her murdered sister and overcome her Borderline Personality Disorder.

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