

UNIVERSIDADE FEDERAL DO RIO GRANDE DO SUL  
INSTITUTO DE LETRAS  
PROGRAMA DE PÓS-GRADUAÇÃO EM LETRAS  
LITERATURAS DE LÍNGUA INGLESA

**Sexual Blinding of Women: Alice Walker's  
African Character Tashi and the Issue of  
Female Genital Cutting**

Dissertação submetida à Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul  
para obtenção do grau de Mestre em Letras  
na ênfase Literaturas de Língua Inglesa

Mestranda: Gabriela Eltz Brum  
Orientadora: Profa. Dra. Sandra Sirangelo Maggio

Porto Alegre  
Setembro, 2005

## FICHA CATALOGRÁFICA

BRUM, Gabriela Eltz

**Sexual Blinding of Women: Alice Walker's African Character Tashi and the Issue of Female Genital Cutting**

Gabriela Eltz Brum

Porto Alegre: UFRGS, Instituto de Letras, 2005. 132 p.

Dissertação (Mestrado - Programa de Pós-graduação em Letras)  
Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul.

1. Literatura de língua inglesa. 2. Literatura afro-americana. 3. Crítica literária. 4. Alice Walker. 5. Mutilação genital.

## **AGRADECIMENTOS**

Ao Programa de Pós-Graduação em Letras da Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul, que me aceitou como aluna e acreditou no meu potencial.

À Comissão de Aperfeiçoamento do Pessoal de Ensino Superior (CAPES), pela bolsa que me foi concedida e pela oportunidade que me deu para dedicar-me com exclusividade ao curso de mestrado.

Aos membros da banca, Profa. Ana Ibaños, Profa. Ana Lúcia Tettamanzy e Profa. Rosalia Neumann Garcia, por disponibilizarem seu precioso e escasso tempo para ler e avaliar meu trabalho.

À Profa. Sandra Sirangelo Maggio, que, além de me orientar, sempre me incentivou como uma grande amiga.

À escritora norte-americana Alice Walker, pela grande motivação que senti durante minha pesquisa: sem ela e sua obra, esse trabalho não existiria.

A meus amados pais, que sempre me apoiaram nas conquistas de todos os meus sonhos, por mais impossíveis que fossem, e a Júlio, meu noivo, que sempre esteve ao meu lado, me apoiando e também me cobrando, durante o decorrer do curso.

Por fim, a todos aqueles que, direta ou indiretamente, auxiliaram na realização deste trabalho.

***The world, I believe, is easier to change than we think. And harder. Because the change begins with each one of us saying to ourselves, and meaning it: I will not harm anyone or anything in this moment. Until, like recovering alcoholics, we can look back one hour, a day, a week, a year, of comparative harmlessness.***

**Alice Walker, *Anything we Love can be Saved***

## RESUMO

Este trabalho consiste em uma leitura das diferentes formas de representação que podem ser atribuídas à personagem Tashi, protagonista do romance *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992), da escritora negra estadunidense Alice Walker. Antes desta obra, Tashi já havia aparecido em dois romances de Walker, primeiro em *The Color Purple* (1982), como personagem periférica, e depois como menção em *The Temple of my Familiar* (1989). Com Tashi, surge a temática da prática da circuncisão feminina, ritual ao qual a personagem se submete no início da idade adulta. O foco de observação do trabalho se volta para a maneira na qual a revolta da autora é transformada em um meio de representação criativa. Walker utiliza sua obra abertamente como instrumento ideológico para que o tema da “mutilação genital” (termo utilizado pela autora) receba ampla atenção da mídia e da crítica em geral. O propósito da investigação é avaliar até que ponto o engajamento social da autora contribui de uma forma positiva em seu trabalho e até que ponto o mesmo engajamento o atrapalha. Para a análise das diferentes questões relacionadas ao tema de “female genital cutting” (FGC), termo que eu utilizo no decorrer da pesquisa, os trabalhos de críticas e escritoras feministas como Ellen Gruenbaum, Lightfoot-Klein, Nancy Hartsock, Linda Nicholson, Efrat Tseëlon e a egípcia Nawal El Saadawi serão consultados. Espero que esta dissertação possa contribuir como uma observação sobre como Alice Walker usa seu engajamento social na criação de seu mundo fictício.

Palavras Chaves:

Alice Walker – circuncisão feminina – literatura afro-americana – feminismo

## ABSTRACT

This thesis provides a reading of the different forms of representation that can be attributed to the character Tashi, the protagonist of the novel *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992), written by the African American writer Alice Walker. Before this work Tashi had already appeared in two previous novels by Walker, first, in *The Color Purple* (1982) and then, as a mention, in *The Temple of My Familiar* (1989). With Tashi, the author introduces the issue of female circumcision, a ritual Tashi submits herself to at the beginning of her adult life. The focus of observation lies in the ways in which the author's anger is transformed into a means of creative representation. Walker uses her novel *Possessing the Secret of Joy* openly as a political instrument so that the expression "female mutilation" (term used by the author) receives ample attention from the media and critics in general. The aim of this investigation is to evaluate to what extent Walker's social engagement contributes to the development of her work and to what extent it undermines it. For the analysis of the different issues related to "female genital cutting", the term I use in this thesis, the works of feminist critics and writers such as Ellen Gruenbaum, Lightfoot-Klein, Nancy Hartsock, Linda Nicholson, Efrat Tseëlon and the Egyptian writer and doctor Nawal El Saadawi will be consulted. I hope that this thesis can contribute as an observation about Alice Walker's use of her social engagement in the creation of her fictional world.

Key-words:

Alice Walker – female genital cutting – African-American literature - feminism

## RESUMEN

Este trabajo consiste en una lectura de las diferentes formas de representación que pueden ser atribuidas al personaje Tashi, protagonista de la novela *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992), de la escritora negra norte-americana Alice Walker. Antes de esta obra, Tashi ya había aparecido en dos romances de Walker, primero en *The Color Purple* (1982), como personaje periférica y después como mención en *The Temple of My Familiar* (1989). Con Tashi, surge la temática de la circuncisión femenina, ritual al cual Tashi se somete en el principio de la edad adulta. El foco de observación del trabajo se vuelca sobre las maneras en las cuales la revuelta de la autora se transforma en un medio de creación creativa. Walker utiliza su obra abiertamente como instrumento político para que el tema de la “mutilación genital” (termino utilizado por la autora) reciba amplia atención de los medios y crítica en general. El propósito de la investigación es evaluar hasta que punto el involucramiento social de la autora contribuye positivamente o interfiere en el desarrollo de su trabajo. Para el análisis de las diferentes cuestiones relacionadas al tema de “female genital cutting” (FGC), termino utilizado por mi en el decorrer del trabajo, las obras de las críticas y escritoras feministas como Ellen Gruenbaum, Lightfoot-Klein, Nancy Hartsock, Linda Nicholson, Efrat Tseëlon y la egipcia Nawal El Saadawi serán consultadas. Deseo que el trabajo realizado pueda contribuir como una observación sobre como Alice Walker utiliza su involucramiento social en la creación de su mundo ficticio.

Palabras claves:

Alice Walker - circuncisión femenina – literatura afro-americana - feminismo

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>INTRODUCTION</b> .....	10
<b>1 ALICE WALKER: A WARRIOR</b> .....	18
1.1 A Word about the Author.....	18
1.2 Alice Walker's Biography.....	23
1.3 The Author and the Issue of Female Genital Cutting (FGC).....	39
<b>2 FEMALE GENITAL CUTTING (FGC)</b> .....	46
2.1 An Anthropological View.....	46
2.2 Religion and Patriarchy.....	51
2.3 Colonialism and Post-colonialism.....	63
2.4 Gender, Aesthetics and Feminism.....	70
2.5 Health and Sexuality.....	77
<b>3 THE CHARACTER TASHI IN THE NOVELS</b> .....	86
3.1 <i>The Color Purple</i> .....	86
3.2 <i>The Temple of My Familiar</i> .....	94
3.3 <i>Possessing the Secret of Joy</i> .....	99
<b>CONCLUSION</b> .....	122
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b> .....	129



## CHARTS AND IMAGES

<a href="http://www.cidm.pt/imgs_mutilacao_genital/logo.gif">http://www.cidm.pt/imgs_mutilacao_genital/logo.gif</a> - (29 01 2005).....	01
<a href="http://www.pbs.org/wnet/aaworld/reference/images/alice_walker.jpg">http://www.pbs.org/wnet/aaworld/reference/images/alice_walker.jpg</a> (29.01.2005).....	04
<a href="http://www.st-lucie.lib.fl.us/zora/marker4.htm">http://www.st-lucie.lib.fl.us/zora/marker4.htm</a> (29.01.2005).....	30
<a href="http://www.unc.edu/.../event/lecture/walker_alice.jpg">www.unc.edu/.../event/lecture/walker_alice.jpg</a> (11.08.2005).....	37
Chart # 01: A list of Alice Walker's Works.....	38
<a href="http://rus-circ.chat.ru/FemCirc.htm">http://rus-circ.chat.ru/FemCirc.htm</a> (29 01 2005).....	50
Chart # 02: Kinds of FGC.....	51
<a href="http://www.notjustskin.org/image/flowernew.gif">http://www.notjustskin.org/image/flowernew.gif</a> (29.01.2005).....	130

## INTRODUCTION

Alice Walker's books first called my attention due to her writing style, which is definitely unique. The first novel I read by her was *The Color Purple* (1982), that affected me by the crudity of the words and by the matter-of-fact way of exposing the tragic stories lived by the women characters. Walker stroke me, above all, as a very critical author who uses her art as a way of presenting any subject that for her is relevant and urgent. Walker's political consciousness was developed at the tender age of seventeen, when she became a social activist during the Civil Rights movement of the sixties. Since then, justice has become her flag and through her work she creates fiction that looks as if it is non-fiction. Sometimes her eagerness to make people conscious about extremely important issues such as female genital cutting is so desperate that her text suffers the consequences, and her work becomes a social and political writing presented in the form of fiction.

The goal of this thesis is mainly to investigate what is for Walker, after all, the implicit concept of literature. Certainly it is miles away from Oscar Wilde's concept of "Art for Art's Sake". Walker's writing is more like a vehicle used to transmit ideas, closer to the Roman poet Horace's concept of art as being simultaneously "*Dulce et Utile*", although, in Walker's writing, the term "*dulce*" is not a very appropriate one! In our contemporary Western culture, books seem to

have been divided into two groups. While some books are constructed mainly as sources of pleasure, others are conveyors of important messages and information. In this sense, as Alice Walker seems to join these different characteristics, she ends up creating a very disquieting sort of art, which is sometimes rejected by literary critics, sometimes rejected by social thinkers, sometimes praised by both sorts of intellectuals.

The issue of female circumcision first called my attention during the reading of *The Color Purple*, winner, in 1983, of both prizes, the Pulitzer and the American Book Award for fiction. Among many urgent topics dealt with in the novel such as incest, domestic violence, racism and sexism, female circumcision played a smaller role. An African character, Tashi, a young woman, undergoes the surgery in order to be accepted by her people and as a way to protect her tribal identity, which is being threatened by colonialists.

My first idea was to work with *The Color Purple*, due to its richness of important themes for a feminist literary critical approach, but when I found out that Walker had written a novel that dealt exclusively with the issue of female circumcision I changed my mind. Tashi received a whole novel for herself, entitled *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992), where Walker goes deeper into such a delicate and complex subject as 'female genital mutilation,' as she calls it. In Walker's words:

It took me twenty-five years since I first heard about female genital mutilation to know how to approach it. To understand what it means to all of us in the world, that you can have this kind of silencing of the pain of millions of women, over maybe six thousand years.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> WALKER, Alice; PARMAR, Pratibha. *Warrior Marks: Female Genital Mutilation and the Sexual Blinding of Women*. New York: A Harvest Book, Harcourt Brace & Company, 1996. p. 269.

What might Alice Walker be talking about when she says that it took her 25 years to know how to approach her subject? Partly, she probably refers to the proper way to pursue her aim “aesthetically.” Two and a half decades were necessary for her to accomplish this process of waiting until something that started as an emotional impact might develop into a fictional object. Walker’s process of creation is always widely subjective, to the point of her stating that characters “haunt” her for years, begging to be given birth. Tashi is, certainly, one of those cases. But maybe, in the quotation above, Walker also means that she had to wait for some decades to find her appropriate public, until people’s consciousness about environmental and bio-ethical issues increased, until the interest in things that belong to *otherness* was really developed. It is not impossible, either, that – consciously or not – Walker waited for 25 years so that the concept of what Art is could again, in that endless pendulum movement, so as to re-encompass the notion that art can be useful, can serve a practical purpose, the purpose of changing people’s ideas about a determined political or ethical issue. Because, after reading her work, I ended up strongly believing that Alice Walker considers herself a warrior. So as to win this war, she is willing to contribute with her best. And her best is the art of writing novels.

In *Possessing the Secret of Joy* the enemy to be overthrown is this “silencing” that Walker mentions, that kept the pain of millions of women hidden for over six thousand years. Walker, through her great talent as a writer, approaches one of the most delicate and controversial topics of our times. Her courage motivated me to write this thesis, that deals with fiction and its connections with reality, through the analysis of the development of the character Tashi in three of Alice Walker’s novels: *The Color Purple* (1982), *The Temple of my Familiar* (1989), where Tashi has a very

small appearance, and *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992), where she is presented through the points-of-view of several different characters. The story of Tashi provides the fictional thematic dimension that connects us with a cultural and social issue, with an aspect of reality in which the author aims to interfere. The connections established by Walker concerning the topic of female circumcision reach several areas, and aspects, such as religion, gender, colonialism, post-colonialism, sexuality, anthropology.

As she writes *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, Alice Walker is aware of the fact that she is dealing with a subject that is, simultaneously, a matter of belief to those who practice it, and a subject totally apart from the world of her Western, well-educated, academic readers. Therefore, the author attributes to herself the task of denouncing what for her cannot but be taken as a dreadful practice.

There are some semantic differences that must be clarified before the reading of this thesis. Traditional female genital surgeries have often been referred to in English as “female circumcision”. This is also the term used by the societies in which the surgeries are performed, and by the majority of the anthropologists. “Female genital mutilation”, on the other hand, is the term used by feminists and persons working toward the abolishment of such practices. Fran Hosken is a leader in the anti-circumcision social movement. Her travels in Africa in 1973 changed the direction of her life, as she was the first Western feminist and researcher on the topic to use the term *mutilation* instead of circumcision. Alice Walker adopts Hosken’s term, and this establishes the line that will be followed in her novel. According to the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, to mutilate means “to severely and

violently damage someone's body, especially by removing part of it". Therefore, mutilation is a term that makes sense according to the way in which we Westerners see such surgeries. But it is important to remark that, to the cultures that practice this tradition, our Western abhorrence creates a further barrier to the inter-cultural discussion of the issue. The use of the term *mutilation* by Western feminists has created a further barrier in international women's forums, as many Arab and African women take American and other Western feminists as being patronizing or hostile to them.

African organizations working on the subject have been using the expression Female Genital Cutting (FGC), since the use of the term *mutilation* is not accepted by their cultures. In this thesis I am going to use this term as an intermediate form of approaching the subject in a less radical, more neutral way. By doing this, my references to the issue of FGC will differ from the view adopted by Walker, who understands and sees this tradition as a form of mutilation. This leads us forcibly to acknowledge that, in the fictional construct of *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, we have an African character transposed into the United States and undergoing a slow process of dissolution of her sense of identity. We have a narrative voice that is dissolved amid a myriad of narrators. But the construct is set out by an author who has very strong – we might even say radical – views about the subject.

In order to write this thesis, I am going to rely mainly on articles and information gathered from Feminist critics. The issue of FGC is going to be explored and analyzed through a variety of aspects such as gender, patriarchy, and sexuality. Another theory that proves relevant to this work is Post-colonialism, as nowadays the

issue of FGC has reached almost every corner of the world through the immigration of Africans and Asians to Western countries. The character Tashi is herself an example of this Post-colonial reality, as she immigrates to the United States. The anthropological view is also going to be used, as it is crucial to understand the immense gap between the sets of beliefs of the cultures involved in this clash, as well as the understanding of the roots of such an ancient tradition. A view of the religious concepts involved will also be necessary, in order to clarify the use of religious beliefs behind the practice of FGC.

In the analysis of the character Tashi, I am going to mingle my own impressions and reading with the previously mentioned theories and views, and try to decode what comes out of this mixture of the strong, engaged positions held by the author, and her attempt of allowing room for different opinions through the use of the device of multiple narrators.

Although, as a researcher, perhaps I should be behaving as impartially as possible towards the subject of my investigation, I must acknowledge I thoroughly agree with Alice Walker's view about the utilitarian aspect of a work of art. Besides being a writer of unquestionable talent, she is also a hearty feminist and a social activist. Her poems, essays, short stories and novels have deeply influenced my way of thinking and writing, and I believe she is the main influence behind the writing of this thesis. However, other important theorists have played their part in my research, such as Nancy C.M. Hartsock, Linda J. Nicholson, Ellen Gruenbaum, Hartfoot-Klein, Nawal El Saadawi, among others.

This thesis aims at investigating to what extent Walker's social engagement contributes to the development of her work and to what extent it undermines it. Has Alice Walker succeeded in her attempt to de-mystify such a taboo? Is Walker satisfied with the response to her novel *Possessing the Secret of Joy*? Has she reached her goal as a writer and a militant? These are some questions that motivate this thesis.

The work is divided into three chapters: Chapter one is about Alice Walker, her childhood in Georgia, the accident that caused the blindness of her right eye at the tender age of eight, her struggle to overcome racism, poverty and physical limitation, her participation in the civil rights movement in the sixties, her love for art, her career as a writer and social activist.

Chapter two introduces the issue of FGC, in relation to many different aspects, theories and views such as anthropology, religion, colonialism and post-colonialism, patriarchy, gender, health and sexuality, aesthetics and feminism. Chapter two serves as a scaffold to chapter three.

Chapter three plunges into the fictional part of the thesis, where I present my personal reading of the African character Tashi and explore her passage through the three novels by Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (1982), *The Temple of my Familiar* (1989) and *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992).



At the end of this work I hope to be able to answer the questions that I have asked in this introduction in relation to Walker's achievement of her goals as a writer, feminist and social activist.



## 1 ALICE WALKER: A WARRIOR

*Those of us who are maimed can tell you it is possible to go on. To flourish. To grow. To love and be loved, which is the most important thing. To feel pleasure and to know joy. We can also tell you that mutilation of any part of the body is unnecessary and causes suffering almost beyond imagining. We can tell you that the body you are born into is sacred and whole, like the earth that produced it, and there is nothing that needs to be subtracted from it.*

**Alice Walker, *Warrior Marks***

### 1.1 A Word about the Author

Alice Walker is one of the most important, successful and culturally influential women writers of our time. She became the first African-American woman to receive the Pulitzer Prize in fiction, for her novel *The Color Purple* (1982). Extremely prolific and versatile, her resourcefulness enables her to be a poet, novelist, short story writer, essayist, chronicler and film maker. She is also relied upon as a spokeswoman for black women, and her sharp critical sense makes her a talented critic. One of Walker's writing characteristics is her matter-of-fact way of writing, that goes straight to the core of any issue she is dealing with. Walker is a much spiritualized person and considers herself a medium. Due to her profound mysticism and sensitivity her work is definitely unique.

The topics of Walker's writings are always connected to her own life experience as a colored woman living in a white patriarchal society. The subjects of her writings

include her heritage, its folklore and traditional art, her sufferings as a victim of racism in her homeland, Georgia, the violence practiced by men against their wives and daughters and, above all, the struggle of women to overcome their submission and change their engendered roles in order to live a more dignified and fulfilling life. One of Walker's most famous statements was made in an interview to John O'Brian in 1973: "I am committed to exploring the oppressions, the insanities, the loyalties, and the triumphs of black women".<sup>1</sup>

Walker explains the violence, tragedies, abuse and pain in the lives of the majority of her women characters due to her personal experience as a child growing up in segregated Georgia, where almost every week a man would kill his wife and sometimes the children. These events have left a deep mark in Walker's mind and soul. Thus, through her writings the author is able to vent her dissatisfaction and to protest against all kinds of violence practiced against black women around the world. During an interview given to Krista Brewer in 1981, Walker explains why she writes and sees the world the way she does:

Because I'm black and I'm a woman and because I was brought up poor and because I'm a Southerner, [...] the way I see the world is quite different from the way many people see it. I could not help but have a radical vision of society [...] The way I see things can help people see what needs to be changed.[...] I think that growing up in the South, I have a very keen sense of injustice – a very prompt response to it.<sup>2</sup>

Walker's view of the world is different from the majority of white people and writers, mainly due to the fact that the experiences she had as a Black Southerner during

---

<sup>1</sup> O'BRIAN, John. *Interviews with Black Writers*. New York, Liveright, 1973, p.192.

<sup>2</sup> BREWER, Krista. Writing to Survive: An Interview with Alice Walker. *Southern Exposure* 9, p.12-15, Summer 1981.

her poor childhood in the segregated American fifties, and as a young woman and Civil Rights activist, are almost impossible for white people to imagine and feel.

Mary Helen Washington in her text *An Essay on Alice Walker* (1979), divides Walker's early works into three cycles. Historically speaking, the women of the first cycle belong to the eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The black women characters of those periods are called "the mules of the world", a term borrowed from the early twentieth century black novelist, and Walker's major influence and model, Zora Neale Hurston. Walker calls these women her "suspended" women, as they are incapacitated to move forward due to a lack of opportunities and options. These "are women who are cruelly exploited, spirits and bodies mutilated, relegated to their narrow and confining lives, sometimes driven to madness"<sup>3</sup> (WASHINGTON,1979). The older women characters Mem and Margaret Copeland, from Walker's first novel *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970), are very good examples of the women from this phase.

Walker's female characters of the second cycle belong to the decades of the forties and fifties. According to Washington, a time when black people "wanted most to be part of the mainstream of American life even though assimilation required total denial of one's ethnicity".<sup>4</sup> Several literary critics have named this period in black literature "mainstreaming", a time when characters would deny their heritage and ethnicity in order to be accepted by the white and prosperous American society. A good example of a woman character from this phase is Dee, from one of Walker's most famous short-stories *Everyday Use* (1973). In the story Dee moves up North in order to study, and becomes a total stranger to her family by denying her heritage and roots. In the poem *For My*

---

<sup>3</sup> CHRISTIAN, Barbara T. (ed). *Everyday Use*. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1994, p. 91.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, p.95.

*Sister Molly Who in the Fifties* (1972), Walker depicts a true story about her family, as it is her older sister Molly who leaves home in order to pursue further education, travels abroad and ends up despising and abandoning her family. This episode has marked Walker's life and spirit deeply.

The women of the third cycle are mainly from the late sixties. Alice Walker is a great example of a black woman from this phase. Walker was an activist in the Civil Rights movement of the sixties. She was beaten, went to jail, but never lost the energy and courage to protest and fight for the rights of the black community. In Walker's second novel *Meridian* (1976) the black female protagonist named Meridian has been compared by many critics to Alice Walker, as both get a scholarship to attend an all-black women's college in Atlanta, then leave the segregated South, go to the North to continue their studies, get involved with the Civil Rights movement, work on voter registration, have an undesired pregnancy and decide to undergo abortion, and become totally independent and forward persons. The women from the third cycle do not deny their roots like the women of the second cycle do, but search for the meanings of their traditions and re-examine their relationship with the black Community.

Alice Walker's thematic has always been racism and sexism. Racism has been her main concern as a black woman writer and in her first novel *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970) situations of cruelty and violence against black women are constant. From the beginning of her career we can notice Walker's main goal as a writer: to make her readers see the truths that, otherwise, they would not want to see.

Alice Walker's writing is marked by the authenticity of the author's words. For example, in Walker's poetry the world she writes about is definitely her own world. Since her first book of poetry entitled *Once* (1968), her readers can know her better through the reading of her poems, where she exposes herself and her way of thinking openly. In her essays Walker is also autobiographical, as when she writes about her experiences as a social activist and even about her marriage which ended in divorce. In addition, some autobiographical relations have also been established between Walker and some of her women characters such as Meridian, Maggie (from the short-story "Everyday Use") and even Tashi, due to the fact that both women are "mutilated".

Walker's writing style is unique, and it is due to its simplicity and accessibility that her work reaches millions of readers. She does not search for complicated structures in order to impress her readers and critics. On the contrary, she opens the way through the use of simple and direct words. It seems as if Walker does not have time to lose, and the urgency of her messages makes her writing style "economic", like an urgent code.

Alice Walker is considered a minority writer because she is a woman, and black. Like other minority writers, she writes about issues that are relevant to them: their heritage, their religion, their art, their poor childhood, their oppression and their victories. The United States have given birth to a number of important black women writers such as Zora Neale Hurston, Nella Larsen, Frances Watkins Harper, Dorothy West, Ann Petry, Paule Marshall and, more recently, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker and Maya Angelou. What these women have in common is the fact that their writings are created from the perspective of African-American women, who approach humankind in a different way

than the majority of writers do. This same view related to similar life experiences is what connects them and their work.

## **1.2 Alice Walker's Biography**

Alice Walker was born in Eatonton, Georgia, on February 9, 1944, the youngest of eight children by Willie Lee Walker, a sharecropper and dairy farmer and Minnie Tallulah Walker, a maid and helper in the fields. In her free time, Minnie used to tend her garden where she planted flowers everywhere, and in the evenings she made quilts in order to keep her family warm during the cold winter days. Minnie has always been a wonderful inspiration and a major influence in Walker's life and writing.

A happy and outgoing child at first, Walker saw her life change drastically at the tender age of eight, because of an accident that caused her to lose the sight of her right eye. One of her older brothers shot her, by accident, with a BB gun. After this episode in her life, Walker changed into a timid, lonely and reserved child. As her family was living in a new community at the time of the accident, Walker used to be teased by her new classmates at school because of her eye, which became white. Her parents, mistakenly, thought that it would be better for her to move back to their old community and live with her grandparents. As a result, Walker felt that she was being punished for the accident. Although her brother had been guilty for the accident, she was the one who was sent away.

As Walker withdrew after the accident, she became more observing and analytical. She also started reading more and writing down poems and her parents'

stories, as they were both great storytellers. Walker found out that the act of writing helped her to overcome her feelings of inadequacy and loneliness.

At fourteen, while visiting a much older brother in Boston, Walker had the scar tissue removed from her eye; the surgery was paid for by her brother, and almost immediately her confidence returned. By the time she graduated from high school, her self-respect was so high that she was the valedictorian of her class.

It was at seventeen that Walker first got in touch with the Civil Rights movement. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., a leader in the movement, was the first black person she saw on TV. Later, Walker became an active participant in the movement, as she used to go to marches and demonstrations. She worked on voter registration in Georgia and for the Head Start program in Mississippi, as well as for the department of welfare in New York. Barbara Kramer explains how Walker succeeded in her studies and was able to go to Spelman College, in Atlanta:

Ironically, the accident that had caused her blindness in one eye also helped open the door to her future. Because of her disability, Alice qualified for a scholarship given by the Georgia Department of rehabilitation to physically challenged students. The award was for free textbooks and half of her college expenses. Because of her high grades, she was offered a scholarship from Spelman College which covered the other half of her expenses. The women in her church also took up a collection. They raised \$75 to help send Alice to college.<sup>5</sup>

It is important to mention that if Walker had not been a physically challenged student, her chances of going to college might have been smaller, since her family did not have economic conditions to send her away in order to pursue further education.

---

<sup>5</sup> KRAMER, Barbara. *Alice Walker*. New Jersey: Enslow Publishers, Inc., 1995, p.28.



In 1962, at eighteen, Walker got a chance to travel abroad for the first time. She and another girl from Spelman College attended the World Youth Peace Festival in Helsinki, Finland. The money for the trip was raised by women from Atlanta's African-American churches. Before their trip, the girls were encouraged to meet the wife of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Coretta Scott King, a very active woman in the movement for peace. On the same trip Walker also went to Russia, and her words explain her early commitment to the world peace:

I was determined to impress upon all the Russians I met that I was not their enemy, and that I opposed the idea my government had at that time of possibly killing all of them. I have never regretted offering smiles to the children of Russia, instead of agreeing with a paranoid government to throw bombs.<sup>6</sup>

After Walker's sophomore year at Spelman, she got another scholarship which enabled her to transfer to Sarah Lawrence College in Bronxville, New York. There she received more encouragement for her writing and felt freer. Another difference between both colleges was that Spelman was an all-black school while in Sarah Lawrence she was one among the only six African-American students.

In 1964, at twenty, Walker had the opportunity to travel to Africa for the first time. She received a fellowship and spent her summer holidays in Kenya, where she helped build a school and got in touch with the African culture. After Africa, Walker did some traveling in Europe before returning home.

When Walker returned from her journey she had to face the most difficult time of her life: "I had been to Africa during the summer, and returned to school healthy and

---

<sup>6</sup> WALKER, Alice. *Anything We Love can be Saved*. New York: The Ballantine Publishing Group, 1997.

brown, and loaded down with sculptures and orange fabric - and pregnant".<sup>7</sup> This unexpected pregnancy made her think seriously about committing suicide, as she had no one to turn to for help. She did not have money for an abortion, and she did not feel that she had any maternal instinct. She felt very lonely and sick, vomiting incessantly. As a result, she stopped eating. For three days she did not eat or sleep. She just stayed in bed with a razor blade underneath her pillow. Walker became so weak that she started having visions: she saw the faces of people from her family on the walls, and the face of a friend of hers became a lion's face. Finally, with the help of some classmates she was able to find a doctor who would perform the abortion. In Walker's words:

On the last day for miracles, one of my friends telephoned to say someone had given her a telephone number. I called from school, hoping for nothing, and made an appointment. I went to see the doctor and he put me to sleep. When I woke up, my friend was standing over me holding a red rose. She was a blonde, gray-eyed girl, who loved horses and tennis, and she said nothing as she handed me back my life.<sup>8</sup>

When Walker returned to Sarah Lawrence, after the abortion, she started writing incessantly. Basically, all the poems present in Walker's first book of poetry are from this period of her life. She wrote about her experiences in Africa, her commitment to the Civil Rights movement, her attempt to almost commit suicide, and love poems. Every morning she would slide the poems she had written the day before under the door of her mentor and teacher Muriel Rukeyser, also a poet. Rukeyser appreciated the value of Walker's work and gave them to her agent, who sent them to a large New York publisher. Three years later the collection of poems *Once* (1968) was published. Walker

---

<sup>7</sup> WALKER, Alice. *In Search of our Mother's Gardens*. New York: Hartcourt Brace & Company, 1983,p.245.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p.247.

received great reviews on her first book and it went into second edition almost immediately.

Rukeyser helped Walker again with the publication of her first short-story, "To Hell with Dying". The story was sent to Langston Hughes, a well known African-American writer who, two years later, published it in a collection of short stories entitled *Best Short Stories by Negro Writers* (1969).

After graduating from Sara Lawrence College, Walker decided to do some social work, besides continuing with her writing. She went back to Georgia for the summer where she worked registering voters. Then she returned to New York where she worked with the New York City Welfare Department. In 1966 Walker received her first writing grant and decided to go to Mississippi, one of the most segregated states in North America.

In Mississippi, Walker met a white law student named Mel Leventhal, also a worker for the Civil Rights movement. They fell in love and as he had to finish his studies in New York, Walker followed him. Back in New York Walker received a three hundred dollar award for her essay "The Civil Rights Movement: What Good Was It?" (1967). This essay was sent to the annual *American Scholar* magazine essay contest and won first prize.

Still in New York, Walker started writing her first novel, but the noise of the big city distracted her. Luckily, through a fellowship granted by the MacDowell Colony in rural New Hampshire, Walker was able to stay at the colony and write full time in a peaceful environment. Leventhal used to visit her on the weekends. After about six weeks,

Walker decided to give up the fellowship and moved back to New York, where she married Leventhal on March 17, 1967.

After Leventhal's graduation they decided to move back to Mississippi. There Mel worked as a Civil Rights lawyer, while Walker, through a Headstart program called *Friends of the Children of Mississippi*, instructed teachers on how to teach African-American History to children. Those were dangerous times in the South, as Barbara Kramer explains:

It was a difficult time for an interracial couple to live in Mississippi. There had been a state law ordering that they could not live in the same house. This law had been ruled unconstitutional by the U.S. Supreme Court three months before they moved there. Even so, the two were afraid their home would be attacked by people who did not approve of their marriage. They lived with a big dog and a rifle by the door.<sup>9</sup>

Besides the permanent tension felt in Mississippi, Walker found inspiration for her writing. According to Walker, the stories she found there were "knee-deep".<sup>10</sup> She realized that those were the women she wanted to write about and depict in her work. They were the most oppressed, due to the fact that they were women and black. During this period of her life Walker was extremely prolific, as she wrote essays, poems, short-stories and kept on working on her first novel.

In 1968, Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated. "[...] It was as if the last light in my world had gone out",<sup>11</sup> Walker wrote, showing her suffering as he was her hero and model. Walker and Leventhal went to Atlanta for his funeral, which gathered two

---

<sup>9</sup> KRAMER, Barbara. *Alice Walker*. New Jersey: Enslow Publishers, Inc., 1995,p.46.

<sup>10</sup> WALKER, Alice . *In Search of our Mother'sGardens*. New York: Hartcourt Brace & Company, 1983,p.224.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p.147.

hundred thousand people. She was pregnant at the time and, possibly due to her grief and despair, she had a miscarriage. In Walker's words:

The week after that long, four-mile walk across Atlanta, and after the tears and anger and the feeling of turning gradually to stone, I lost the child I had been carrying. I did not even care. It seemed to me, at the time, that if "he" (it was weeks before my tongue could form his name) must die no one deserved to live, not even my own child.<sup>12</sup>

After the episode of King's death, Walker put all her energy into writing, as she had always done during the most difficult and depressing times of her life. She kept working as a teacher as well, teaching at Jackson State University. In 1969 she finished her first novel entitled *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, published in 1970. Her first and only child Rebecca was born only three days after Walker finished the novel. Walker's first novel is the most violent of all her novels, as she depicts scenes of extreme aggression against Southerner black women by her husbands.

Motherhood was not an easy task for Walker, who felt deprived of her freedom of mobility and of her time for writing. She felt depressed, and in 1972 decided to move alone with her daughter to Massachusetts. Her husband stayed behind, working in Mississippi. Walker taught a course on African-American women writers in both Cambridge and at the University of Massachusetts in Boston. It was the only course of its kind at the time, and Zora Neale Hurston's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* was one of the books to be read by Walker's students. Hurston's name was not known by Walker's students, and through this course Walker was able to rekindle Hurston's name and work in the academic world of the Letters.

---

<sup>12</sup> Ibid,p.148.

In 1973 Walker went on a journey to Florida in order to find Hurston's grave. Walker wanted to put a marker on the grave, as she knew Hurston had died in poverty and was buried in a cemetery for indigents. After much inquiry she was able to find the abandoned cemetery overrun with weeds. There, with a lot of difficulty she was able to more or less spot the site of the grave. Walker then ordered a headstone in which she asked to be engraved the following words:



An essay entitled "Looking for Zora"<sup>13</sup> was the result of Walker's trip to Florida. Walker is considered greatly responsible for the current popularity of Zora Neale Hurston's work. Through her teachings and essays, Walker was able to propagate a renewed interest in Hurston's writing. Walker also compiled a collection of Hurston's work, which was published in 1979.

---

<sup>13</sup> WALKER, Alice . *In Search of our Mother's Gardens*. New York: Hartcourt Brace & Company, 1983,p.93.

The year of 1973 was a productive and prosperous year for Walker, she published her second book of poetry entitled *Revolutionary Petunias and Other Poems*, which won the Lillian Smith Award (a prize given to writers that contribute to the understanding of the South), and her first collection of short stories, called *In Love and Trouble: Stories of Black Women*, which also won a prize: The Richard and Hinda Rosenthal Award, from the American Institute of Arts and Letters.

In 1974, the family reunited again and moved back to New York. Walker worked as a contributing editor for *Ms. Magazine*, and during her free time, dedicated herself to her writing. In the same year Walker published a young adult's biography about the African-American writer Langston Hughes, entitled *Langston Hughes: American Poet*.

In 1976 Walker's second novel, *Meridian*, was published. As previously mentioned, in this novel Walker uses her own life experiences to create the character Meridian. That was an intense year for Walker: the loss of her father, and the divorce after nine years of marriage, left her devastated. As a result, she wrote her third book of poetry. The title of the book was taken from the last words that her mother had said to her father: *Good Night, Willie Lee, I'll see you in the Morning* (1979).

Walker bought a house in Brooklyn in order to start writing her third novel, *The Color Purple* (1982), but soon realized that she had made a mistake, as she could not concentrate with the hustle and bustle of the big city. She realized that her characters needed a peaceful and quiet environment in order to develop. In 1978 Walker sold the house and moved to California, more precisely, to San Francisco. There she met an old friend, Robert Allen, from the time she had studied at Spelman College, and they got together. Walker enjoyed living in San Francisco, but still her characters would not show

up. She sensed that the characters were country folks and needed the countryside and her total attention. Finally, Walker and Allen rented a country house in northern California. In addition, she decided to quit her other job as a long-distance editor for *Ms.* magazine and turned down requests for lectures and poetry readings. She wanted to commit herself completely to the writing of this novel. In addition, Walker sold her second collection of short stories called *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down*, published in 1981. With the advance she received for the book plus the monthly retainer she still got from *Ms* magazine, Walker was able to support herself for a whole year and dedicate her time exclusively to writing her most famous novel: *The Color Purple* (1982).

During the first weeks, Walker decided to enjoy the nature and the quiet of the place. As a result, her characters finally appeared. When her daughter Rebecca arrived to spend the next couple of years with them, "my characters adored her",<sup>14</sup> wrote Walker. It took Walker a year to write her most prized novel and masterpiece. It is relevant to mention that on the last page of *The Color Purple*, Walker wrote: "I thank everybody in this book for coming. A.W, author and medium." By doing this she positions herself as an interpreter for the spirits that told their stories through her.

*The Color Purple* became a best-seller, and its reading was required in a variety of classes such as literature, sociology and history. Walker's life changed drastically after the winning of the coveted Pulitzer Prize in 1983. Walker started receiving many requests for interviews and personal appearances. She became a Distinguished Writer in the Department of African-American Studies at the University of California, Berkeley, and also taught creative writing at Brandeis University.

---

<sup>14</sup> WALKER, Alice . *In Search of our Mother's Gardens*. New York: Hartcourt Brace & Company, 1983,p.359.



In 1983 Walker published a collection of essays, reviews and speeches she had collected over a period of seventeen years. This book, called *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*, may serve as Walker's autobiography, as the material collected is mainly about her life experiences and impressions on a variety of subjects.

Her fourth book of poetry *Horses Make a Landscape Look More Beautiful* was published in 1984. The title is quoted from a Native American holy person called Lame Deer. In this book, besides Walker's main focus, which is the oppression of African-American women, she also focused on the environment and on her search to know her ancestors. In the same year, Walker and Allen started their own publishing company called Wild Trees Press. The idea was to remain small and help first-time writers to have a start. The books published by them always showed some political awareness. "I don't think we would publish a book, no matter how beautifully written, about people who never change politically [...] That wouldn't be worth the paper"<sup>15</sup>, Walker said in an interview.

When Walker received an offer by Steven Spielberg to make *The Color Purple* into a film, she was surprised. At first she was not sure if she wanted to do it or not, but soon she realized that the movie would reach a much larger audience and her ideas would be spread to people all over the world. One of Walker's requirements for the making of the film was that half of the off-screen crew would have to be black, or women, or Third World people.

---

<sup>15</sup> ROSE, Pat, "Growing Books at Wild Trees Press," *Small Press*, November/December 1986, p.35.

Whoopi Goldberg, after reading the book, liked the story and the character Celie so much that she wrote to Walker and asked if she could play the role of Celie. Goldberg was a comedian at the time, performing in nightclubs. She had never acted in a movie. Walker liked the idea, and when Quincy Jones asked her whom she wanted for the character, she named Whoopi. Margaret Avery was chosen to play the role of Shug Avery, and Danny Glover was selected as "Mister". The movie *The Color Purple* received eleven Academy Award nominations, including best picture, but lost to *Out of Africa*.

In 1988 Walker published a picture book called *To Hell with Dying* and her second collection of essays entitled *Living by the Word*. The title of this work came through a dream Walker had, in which a wise two-headed woman advised her on how to help save the planet. She said: "Live by the word and keep walking"<sup>16</sup>. In Barbara Kramer's words:

Walker called this book a "journey". It is a journey in both the physical and spiritual sense. The physical journey includes essays about her travels to China, Bali, and Jamaica. The spiritual journey includes memories of family and friends, her insights about the criticism directed at *The Color Purple*, her concerns about human rights and the environment, and changes in her own life<sup>17</sup>.

Walker's fourth novel, *The Temple of My Familiar*, was published in 1989. Walker's description of the book is "a romance of the last 500,000 years",<sup>18</sup> where memories of very ancient times and different reincarnations are kept alive in the mind of the character Lissie. In the story, some characters from her previous novel *The Color*

---

<sup>16</sup> WALKER, Alice. *Living by the Word*. New York: A Harvest Book, Harcourt Brace & Company, 1988, p.2.

<sup>17</sup> KRAMER, Barbara. *Alice Walker*. New Jersey: Enslow Publishers, Inc., 1995, p.94.

<sup>18</sup> JAYNES, Gregory. "Living by the Word", *Life*, May 1989, p.64.

*Purple* reappear, as is the case of Olivia and Celie. Walker explains their “revival” simply by saying that she had been missing them<sup>19</sup>.

In 1991 Walker’s fifth book of poetry *Her Blue Body Everything We Know* was published. In this book Walker compiled poems from her previous books of poetry plus sixteen new poems. Walker’s picture book *Finding the Green Stone* was also published in the same year.

In 1992 Walker published her fifth novel entitled *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. The story deals with one of the most controversial issues of her work: female genital cutting (FGC). On the following year, the documentary book *Warrior Marks: Female Genital Mutilation and the Sexual Blinding of Women* was published, following the documentary film *Warrior Marks*, made in a partnership between Alice Walker and London based filmmaker Pratibha Parmar.

*The Same River Twice: A Memoir* was published in 1996. It is a collection of essays about the making of the film *The Color Purple*. Walker gathered magazine clippings, photographs, the original screenplay and some journal entries. In this work she also writes about the criticism received from the black community due to her negative depiction of black men in the novel.

In 1997, Walker published another collection of essays entitled *Anything We Love Can be Saved – a writer’s activism*. In this book Walker writes mainly about her life as a social activist and writer and her optimistic belief that we can improve the world. The range of topics found in her essays vary: religion and spirituality, family and identity,

---

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

politics, feminism, civil rights, banned books, etc. This book shows Walker's personal growth throughout her career and life.

The novel *By the Light of My Father's Smile* was published in 1999. The main issue dealt in this novel is the abuse of patriarchy by a father who represses his two daughters. The story moves back and forth between living and dead characters and the past and the present as the girls succeed in overcoming the sexual repression imposed upon them.

In 2001 Walker published a collection of short stories, part *memoirs*, part fiction, and part autobiographical, entitled *The Way Forward is with a Broken Heart*. In the first story "To My Young Husband", Walker writes about her early marriage to a white man and her puzzlement at how their connection faded to nothing, ending in divorce. Walker also talks about bisexuality and her surprising discovery that she finds women sexy. In the same year *Sent by Earth: A Message from the Grandmother Spirit after the Bombing of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon* was published as a short text (64 pages). Besides the September eleven attack, Walker writes about other issues such as the history of racist oppression in the United States, female genital mutilation, African cultural tradition, and more.

2003 was a year of poetry for Alice Walker, as she published two books of poems: *Absolute Trust in the Goodness of the Earth: New Poems* and *A Poem Traveled Down My Arm: Poems and Drawings*. In both books her profound sensibility and insights in relation to every important matter can be clearly noticed by her readers.

In 2004 Walker published another novel: *Now is the Time to Open Your Heart*. In this novel Walker mixes adventure and spiritual quest as the 57-year-old protagonist Kate Talkingtree goes on a spiritual journey to the Amazon rain forest where she gets in touch with “yag”, a beverage that is known to the natives as the Grandmother, and that induces spiritual trances.

Nowadays Walker lives in Northern California and has proclaimed herself bisexual and pagan. Since she is extremely prolific, probably at this very moment she is working on another book.



This is Alice Walker's list of books, presented in a chronological order:

1. *Once* (1968) - Poems
2. *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970) - Novel
3. *Revolutionary Petunias and Other poems* (1973) – Poems
4. *In Love and Trouble: Stories of Black Women* (1973) – Short stories
5. *Good Night, Willie Lee, I'll see you in the Morning* (1979) - Poems
6. *Langston Hughes: American Poet* (1974) – A young adult biography of Langston Hughes.
7. *Meridian* (1976) - Novel
8. *I Love Myself When I Am Laughing ... and Then Again When I Am Looking Mean and Impressive* (1979)  
– A collection of Zora Neale Hurston's writings.
9. *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down* (1981) – short stories
10. *The Color Purple* (1982) - Novel
11. *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (1983) – Essays
12. *Horses Make a Landscape Look More Beautiful* (1984) – Poems
13. *Living by the Word* (1988) – Essays
14. *To Hell with Dying* (1988) – Picture book
15. *The Temple of My Familiar* (1989) – Novel
16. *Her Blue Body Everything We Know: Earthling Poems 1965-1990 Complete.* (1991) – Poems
17. *Finding the Green Stone* (1991) – Picture book
18. *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992) – Novel
19. *Warrior Marks: Female Genital Mutilation and the Sexual Blinding of Women* (1993) – A documentary book
20. *The Same River Twice: A Memoir* (1996) – Essays
21. *Anything We Love Can be Saved – a writer's activism* (1997) – Essays
22. *By the Light of My Father's Smile* (1999) – Novel
23. *The Way Forward is with a Broken Heart* (2001) – Short stories
24. *Sent by Earth: A Message from the Grandmother Spirit after the Bombing of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon* (2001) – Essays
25. *Absolute Trust in the Goodness of the Earth: New Poems* (2003) – Poems
26. *A Poem Traveled Down My Arm: Poems and Drawings* (2003) – Poems
27. *Now is the Time to Open Your Heart* (2004) - Novel

### 1.3 The Author and the Issue of Female Genital Cutting (FGC)

Alice Walker's first contact with the issue of FGC took place when she was twenty years old, during her trip to Kenya, East Africa, in 1966. There she heard about the practice when the issue was brought about among the people she was working with, while building a school. In Walker's words: "...nothing in my own experience had prepared me to understand female genital mutilation. It took me years, I say, just to gather my nerve to attempt to write about it".<sup>20</sup>

It was during the filming of *The Color Purple* that Walker thought more thoroughly about the character Tashi and the still-widespread cultural practice of FGC, since the actress playing the role of Tashi was a young African woman who had undergone the traditional practice.

*Possessing the Secret of Joy* is Walker's fifth novel; the whole story moves around Tashi, the African girl from *The Color Purple* who undergoes FGC and changes from a very active and outgoing girl into a woman full of mental and physical traumas. The book was written in Mexico as Walker felt a need to be in a third world country in order to feel more clearly the implications of such a major operation without the necessary medical conditions. It was published in 1992. Walker says it took her a year to write the book after twenty-five years of thinking about how to approach such a difficult issue<sup>21</sup>.

---

<sup>20</sup> WALKER, Alice. *Anything we Love can be Saved*. New York: The Ballantine Publishing Group, 1997, p. 39.

<sup>21</sup> \_\_\_\_\_ ; PARMAR, Pratibha. *Warrior Marks: Female Genital Mutilation and the Sexual Blinding of Women*. New York: A Harvest Book, Harcourt Brace & Company, 1996, p.269.

While doing research for this book, Walker discovered, and was not surprised, that women are blamed for their own sexual mutilation. "Their genitalia are unclean, it is said. Monstrous. The activity of un-mutilated female vulva frightens men and destroys crops. When erect, the clitoris challenges male authority. It must be destroyed."<sup>22</sup>

*Possessing the Secret of Joy* received different kinds of reviews, due to the fact that Walker, through the use of fiction, wrote about an extremely flagrant social issue. According to Barbara Kramer, "The author sometimes concentrates too much on the message, and consequently, the story suffers. Reviewers disagreed about how successful Walker was at combining politics and fiction in this book."<sup>23</sup> Walker probably knew that the critics would negatively criticize her work, and this might have been one of the reasons why it took her twenty-five years to find courage in order to write such a story. This would be a novel that would collide with the twentieth century predominant notion about the limits between art and life, whereas for Walker there is no separation between literature, social commitment, or politics.

Although the book *Possessing the Secret of Joy* reached a great number of people and Walker was able to give the issue widespread attention, she also felt that her work was still incomplete, since there are millions of people who cannot read and, thus, would not get in contact with her book. As a result, Walker decided to make a complement, a documentary film about FGC. Walker contacted Pratibha Parmar, a London based filmmaker who had made several other documentaries which Walker admired, and invited her to be her partner in the making of the film. Parmar accepted,

---

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. p.18.

<sup>23</sup> KRAMER, Barbara. *Alice Walker*. New Jersey: Enslow Publishers, Inc., 1995,p.106.



and together they traveled to Africa in order to make the documentary. There they were able to interview a couple of “circumcisers,” and women and young girls who had undergone the procedure. The cultural background was also focused in the work. The film, entitled *Warrior Marks: Female Genital Mutilation and the Sexual Blinding of Women*, was first shown in New York, on November 3, 1993.

The title of this thesis comes from the title of this movie, because I see it as an intelligent form of expressing what happens to women who undergo the practice of FGC. Another reason for my choice is the fact that Alice Walker suffered a real blinding of her right eye, and consequently, she makes a connection between hers and the African women’s mutilations:

In this film I use the partial blinding I suffered as a child – when one of my brothers shot me in the eye with a pellet gun – as a metaphor for the sexual “blinding” caused by excision of the clitoris. Presenting my own suffering and psychic healing has been a powerful encouragement, I’ve found, to victims of mutilation who are ashamed or reluctant to speak of their struggle. Telling my own story in this context has also strengthened me, an unanticipated gift.<sup>24</sup>

Alice Walker’s emotional link with those “mutilated” African women has been a major motivation behind her work, as the author on a certain level projects her own emotions and reactions as a victim of “mutilation” herself. However, Walker, through her Western view of FGC, has discarded the possibility that these women might be proud of being “circumcised”, and may not feel as victims of mutilation. Walker tries to position herself in equal terms with those women, but fails to see the tradition of FGC in those women’s eyes, probably due to the fact that she is, above all, an American feminist with a Western mentality regarding sexuality.

Whoever is looking for a more neutral, more intercultural vision of the issue of FGC in *Possessing the Secret of Joy* will be disappointed, since the literary perspective of Walker is passionate, partial, radical and romantic. Thus, Walker uses her freedom as a writer, and filters such a dense issue as FGC through the perception of an African-American feminist woman author who has very strong cultural and personal values.

During the filming of *Warrior Marks*, two events affected Walker in a special way: The first was the scene of some young African girls shuffling back to their village after having undergone the surgery ten days before. Their “sadness and the lack of light in their eyes”<sup>25</sup> would stay forever in Walker’s mind and soul. The second event took place while Walker was interviewing a circumciser: When Walker asked the old woman what she felt when she cut the children and they screamed and she said she had never heard them, Walker felt “chilled, even in that hot climate”<sup>26</sup>. But Walker was able to recognize and understand the limitations of the old woman’s life and the choices thrust upon her by her society as well as her ignorance; thus she was capable of feeling compassion for the woman instead of anger. Walker explains the main reason behind the making of *Warrior Marks*:

*Warrior Marks* is not a film about the virtues or the piteousness of victimhood. It was conceived, from the first, as a liberation film. These mutilations of body and spirit have occurred from three to six thousand years. It is likely that they will continue well into the future, no matter what we do.<sup>27</sup>

Walker knows that to put an end to the practice of FGC is almost impossible, as the women who suffer the practice will have to stand up for themselves and, together,

---

<sup>24</sup> WALKER, Alice. *Anything we Love can be Saved*. New York: The Ballantine Publishing Group, 1997, p.33.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, p. 149.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

put an end to it. Since their social and economic conditions are behind this ancient tradition and they are slow to change, it will take hundreds, or maybe thousands of years before FGC is totally banned from the world we live in.

After the movie *Warrior Marks*, Walker and Parmar decided to write a companion book. During their trip to Africa, they both kept journals of their impressions and experiences. Later, they compiled their journals, transcripts from the interviews they made, and photos into a book with the same title: *Warrior Marks: Female Genital Mutilation and the Sexual Blinding of Women* (1993). In this book, Walker writes about her own mutilation as a child. After the “accident” which caused her partial blindness, her parents ignored her injury. They failed to realize how deeply she had been wounded, not only physically but, mainly, in her spirit. They referred to the episode as Alice’s accident. For a long time she felt completely devalued, invisible, worthless, because she felt she had been punished for her own injury and sent away from her family. As a consequence, the thought of suicide haunted her early life, and perhaps determined several of the things she was to do later on, whose shadows she would project into the suffering faces she was to find, later on, in Africa. In a sense, some of these ghosts were to be exorcised in *Possessing the Secret of Joy* and its documentary and companion book sequels.

Or, putting the issue the other way round, nowadays Walker believes that her visual mutilation helped her “see” the subject of genital mutilation. She argues that

---

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, p.148.

women, even after being injured and not yet knowing that there is a war against them, can become warriors and fight back, using their wounds as their guide.<sup>28</sup>

In the book *Warrior Marks* Walker explains the connection she makes between her blinding and the “sexual blinding” of women:

I was eight when I was injured. This is the age at which many “circumcisions” are done. When I see how the little girls – how small they are! – drag their feet after being wounded, I am reminded of myself. How had I learned to walk again, without constantly walking into something? To see again, using half my vision? Instead of being helped to make this transition, I was banished, set aside from the family, as is true of genitally mutilated little girls. For they must sit for a period alone, their legs bound, as their wound heals. It is taboo to speak of what has been done to them.[...] Without the clitoris and other sexual organs, a woman can never see herself reflected in the healthy, intact body of another. Her sexual vision is impaired, and only the most devoted lover will be sexually “seen”. And even then, never completely.<sup>29</sup>

Another similarity between Walker’s “accident” and the practice of FGC is that Walker was instructed by her brothers not to speak of the true cause behind her blindness to their parents, as a result, the subject became a taboo while the truth was kept away. Similarly, African girls are also sworn to secrecy about what has been done to them, which becomes a great taboo in their societies.

Walker has received some severe criticism for her works related to FGC. Ellen Gruenbaum, a very important feminist anthropologist and researcher on the issue of FGC, who lived and worked in Sudan for five years criticizes Walker’s novel *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992) and Walker and Parmar’s film and book *Warrior Marks* (1993). She states that these works “persuaded large numbers of people that a highly damaging,

---

<sup>28</sup> WALKER, Alice ; PARMAR, Pratibha. *Warrior Marks: Female Genital Mutilation and the Sexual Blinding of Women*. New York: A Harvest Book, Harcourt Brace & Company, 1996 , p. 16.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, p. 18-19.

oppressive 'ritual' was being inflicted without reflection, based on male domination and ignorance".<sup>30</sup> Also, Joyce Russel Robinson denounces the "western missionaries" like Alice Walker for "harping on the ritual of female circumcision". Instead, she says, "let them save Africans from malnutrition, unhealthy environments and diseases. Let them save Africans from poverty and violence, themselves responsible from malnutrition, poor sanitation, lack of clean drinking water and infant mortality".<sup>31</sup>

Nowadays Walker has turned her childhood wound into a warrior mark, as she has had to live with it and to transform herself, from someone nearly devastated by her early suffering, into a woman warrior, who fights against all kinds of injustice, loves life, and knows pleasure and joy in spite of all.



---

<sup>30</sup> GRUENBAUM, Ellen. *The Female Circumcision controversy: an anthropological perspective*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001, p.23.

<sup>31</sup> RUSSELL-ROBINSON, Joyce. "African Female Circumcision and the Missionary Mentality". *Issue: A journal of Opinion* (ASA) 26,no.1, p.56,1997.

## 2 FEMALE GENITAL CUTTING (FGC)

*I think of these young girls as little birds whose fragile bodies have been bashed, whose wings have been clipped before they can discover the power of their own souls and their erotic selves. They've been irrevocably wounded by traditions that cause them much pain and deny them the freedom to fly, to flourish.*

**Pratibha Parmar, *Warrior Marks***

### 2.1 An Anthropological View

In spite of so many differences between the Eastern and Western ways of approaching life, science, philosophy and art, there is at least one thing that is shared by the Oriental and the Occidental portions of our planets: the mechanisms of repressing feminine sexuality. Female genital cutting (FGC), for instance, is a practice probably as old as communal life. It can be stated that this tradition can be found, with certainty, to be three to six thousand years old. A Greek papyrus found in the British Museum dated 163 B.C. shows that Greek girls used to be circumcised at the time when they received their dowries.<sup>1</sup>

The Greek geographer Strabo reported the custom found in the twenty-fifth century B.C., when he traveled to Egypt. Strabo discovered that the custom was first

practiced on women of high caste, as a sort of mandatory premarital rite.<sup>2</sup> Herodotus, the famous historian, reports instances of FGC in ancient Egypt in the fifth century B.C.; he states that the custom originated either in Ethiopia or Egypt, as Ethiopians as well as Phoenicians and Hittites used to perform it.<sup>3</sup> It is believed that in ancient Egypt girls could not marry, enter a mosque, or inherit property unless they were circumcised.<sup>4</sup> From its probable origins, FGC seems to have propagated to the red Sea coastal tribes by the Arab traders from Egypt, and from there into Eastern Sudan.<sup>5</sup> For some cultures FGC was a mark of distinction; for others, however, it was a symbol of enslavement and subjugation.<sup>6</sup>

There is also an old Egyptian pharaonic belief about a bisexual aspect in the soul of every person. As a consequence, in order to define their gender, both women and men need to be circumcised:

[...] the feminine "soul" of the male, so it is maintained, is located in the prepuce, whereas the masculine "soul" of the woman is situated in the clitoris. This means that as the young boy grows up and finally is admitted into masculine society he has to shed his feminine properties. This is accomplished by the removal of the prepuce, the feminine portion of his original sexual state. The same is true with a young girl, who upon entering the feminine society is delivered from her masculine properties by having her clitoris or her clitoris and labia excised. Only thus circumcised can the girl claim to be fully a woman and thus capable of sexual life.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> LIGHTFOOT-KLEIN, Hanny. *Prisoners of Ritual: an odyssey into female genital circumcision in Africa*. New York / London: Harrington Park Press, 1989, p.27.

<sup>2</sup>( HOSKEN, 1982a apud LIGHTFOOT-KLEIN, 1989, p.27)

<sup>3</sup>( TABA, 1979 apud LIGHTFOOT-KLEIN, 1989, p.27 )

<sup>4</sup>(GIORGIS, 1981 apud LIGHTFOOT-KLEIN, 1989, p.29)

<sup>5</sup>(MODAWI, 1974 apud LIGHTFOOT-KLEIN, 1989, p.28)

<sup>6</sup> LIGHTFOOT-KLEIN, Hanny. *Prisoners of Ritual: an odyssey into female genital circumcision in Africa*. New York / London: Harrington Park Press, 1989, p.27-28.

<sup>7</sup>( SHAALAN, 1982 apud LIGHTFOOT-KLEIN, 1989, p.29)

Although, in the statement above, FGC is equated with male circumcision, it must be remarked that it involves far more extensive damage to the feminine sexual organs, and more often has damaging effects on the physical and psychological health of the women subjected to it than male circumcision does.

Ellen Gruenbaum, the American feminist and anthropologist, explains the connection between the clitoris and male-like parts:

The clitoris and labia, in cultural contexts in which they are considered “male parts”, are viewed as something that must be removed, lest they produce ambiguity of gender. Inhorn and Buss (1993) mention the idea found among some people in Egypt that an uncut clitoris will eventually lengthen into a male phallus. Having such masculine parts come in contact with the baby at birth is thought to cause harm to the child, an idea not unique to Egypt.<sup>8</sup>

The idea of the clitoris as a dangerous organ is also found in Nigeria, where there is a widespread belief that it is an aggressive organ, and if a baby’s head touches the clitoris during delivery, the baby might die or develop a hydrocephalic head.<sup>9</sup> In addition, in some areas of Ethiopia and Sudan, people believe that if the clitoris is not excised it will dangle between the legs like a man’s penis.<sup>10</sup> In Burkina Faso there is a belief that the clitoris has the power to render men impotent.<sup>11</sup>

According to researcher Hanny Lightfoot-Klein, to call a man “the son of an uncircumcised woman”, in Sudan, is to insult him in the most shameful way. “Historically, uncircumcised women in Sudan have generally been slaves, and the

---

<sup>8</sup> GRUENBAUM, Ellen. *The Female Circumcision controversy: an anthropological perspective*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001, p.68.

<sup>9</sup> ( Oduntan and Onadeko,1984 apud LIGHTFOOT-KLEIN,1989, p.39)

<sup>10</sup> LIGHTFOOT-KLEIN, Hanny. *Prisoners of Ritual: an odyssey into female genital circumcision in Africa*. New York / London: Harrington Park Press,1989,p.39.

<sup>11</sup> (HOSKEN, 1982a apud LIGHTFOOT-KLEIN, 1989, p.39)



epithet implies illegitimacy and a non-Arabic origin”.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, the most severe form of FGC, infibulation, is believed by some cultures to represent a higher status ethnic group.

It is clearly demonstrated by the above information that the practice of FGC is not a tradition which started with the advent of Islam. However, due to the obsessive preoccupation with virginity and chastity that characterizes Islamic societies, the custom of FGC adapted perfectly to the demands of such religion. The religions which adhere to the practice include Muslims, Christians, and Jews, as well as followers of traditional African religions.

Although for some religious groups it marks a rite of passage, for others it is a necessary condition for women to get rid of dirty parts in their bodies, as “the operation in the common language of the people is in fact called the cleansing or purifying operation”.<sup>13</sup> Among other reasons are the removal of male like parts of a woman’s body so she can become a “real” woman and the aesthetic reason where there is a belief that a woman’s intact vulva looks ugly, while a circumcised one is considered aesthetically pleasing.

For the great majority of the cultures which preserve the practice of FGC, the main underlying reason is related to morality, as it is believed that through FGC a girl’s virginity is kept and thus it is a guarantee of marriage for the girl. Another reason might be the fact that polygamy is still widespread in many cultures where FGC is

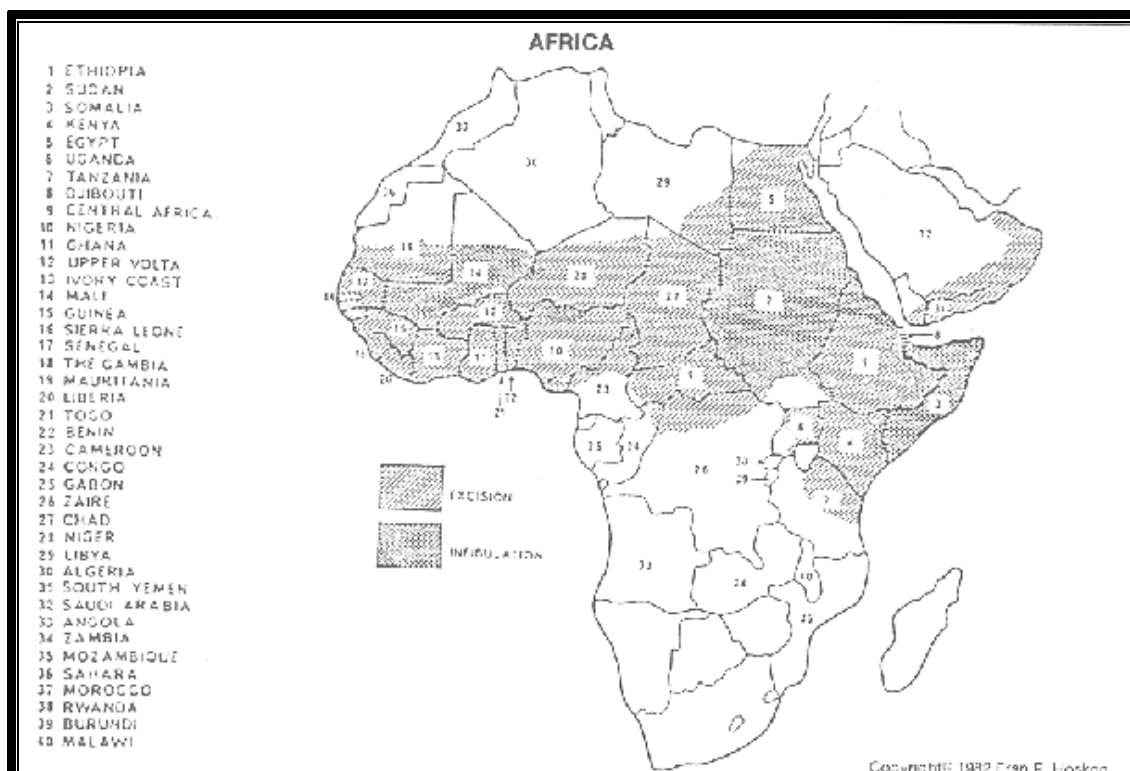
---

<sup>12</sup> LIGHTFOOT-KLEIN, Hanny. *Prisoners of Ritual: an odyssey into female genital circumcision in Africa*. New York / London: Harrington Park Press, 1989, p.69.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, p.34.

practiced. Thus, as the wife is not able to have sex as often as her husband, FGC is performed as a way of diminishing a woman's sexual desire.

The practice of FGC is found primarily in African countries (in 28 countries out of 43), being Sudan the largest country and among a few where the practices are more severe. But it also occurs among ethnic groups in Oman and Yemen, as well as in parts of Iraq, Saudi Arabia, India, Indonesia, and Malaysia.<sup>14</sup> The number of girls who have undergone the practice today varies from eighty-five million to one hundred-fifteen million worldwide. The Program for Appropriate Technology in Health (PATH) estimates that annually two million girls undergo FGC.<sup>15</sup>



<sup>14</sup> (TOUBIA apud NEWELL et al., 2000, p.13-14)

<sup>15</sup> NEWELL, Katherine S. et al. *Discrimination Against the Girl Child*. Washington: Master Print, Inc., 2000, p.12.

There are different kinds of FGC, depending on the culture which adopts the practice:

**Mild sunna:** the pricking, slitting, or removal of the prepuce of the clitoris, leaving little or no damage. *Sunna* is an Arabic word which means “tradition”.

**Modified sunna:** the partial or total excision of the clitoris.

**Clitoridectomy / excision:** the removal of part or all of the clitoris as well as all or part of the labia minora. This operation often results in scar tissue that is so extensive that occludes the vaginal opening. In Sudan this operation is also called *sunna*.

**Infibulation /pharaonic circumcision:** consists of clitoridectomy and the excision of the labia minora as well as the inner layers of the labia majora. The raw edges are then sewn together with cat gut or made to adhere to each other by means of thorns. The suturing together is done so that the remaining skin of the labia majora will heal together and form a bridge of scar tissue over the vaginal opening. A small sliver of wood or straw is inserted into the vagina to prevent complete occlusion, and to leave a passage for urine and the menstrual flow.<sup>16</sup>

Chart # 02: Kinds of FGC

Among the instruments used for the surgeries are razor blades, scissors, kitchen knives, and pieces of glass. Antiseptic techniques and anesthesia are generally not employed, or not known.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup> LIGHTFOOT-KLEIN, Hanny. *Prisoners of Ritual: an odyssey into female genital circumcision in Africa*. New York / London: Harrington Park Press, 1989, p.33.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, p.36.

Sudanese researcher, writer, activist and one of the most outspoken women on the issue of FGC, Nahib Toubia, wrote that the way the cultures which practice FGC see the tradition can be summarized in the following sentence, “The implicit and explicit message is that it is something we inherited from an untraceable past which has no rational meaning and lies within the realm of untouchable sensitivity of traditional people”.<sup>18</sup>

## 2.2 Religion and Patriarchy

Since the beginning of the institutionalized religions in the world it seems that women have been constantly punished because of some ancient transgression. Eve, in our tradition, is a good example. She is responsible for the end of Paradise on earth and the start of hardships and mortality. Due to her lack of self control she was unable to resist temptation. As a result, the fathers of religion have used this symbol to generalize women’s behavior as uncontrolled, guided by desire and lust.

According to researcher Efrat Tseëlon, female sexuality has to be controlled in order to offer women a path to salvation. “As a symbol of seduction and sin, the woman was redeemed in chastity and pardoned in modesty”<sup>19</sup>. Thus, women have been withheld either by the teachings of the different religions, or by their husbands’ control.

---

<sup>18</sup> (TOUBIA,1981 apud GRUENBAUM,2001, p.45.)

<sup>19</sup> TSEËLON, Efrat. *The Masque of Femininity*. London: Sage Publications, 1997, p.12.

There is a controversy regarding the way women are seen by men: although women represent a seductive threat for men, they are the ones most vulnerable to violent or sexual assaults. According to Tseëlon, “within the framework of a psychoanalytic metaphysics, the woman functions like a symptom: she represents a threat while being constructed as a defense against that threat”.<sup>20</sup> Or, if we transpose this analogy to our Western literary tradition, we can refer to the conventions of Courtly Love, held from the 12<sup>th</sup> Century onwards. There, on the one hand, we have those wonderful women, depicted by male poets as unreachable godlike perfect creatures. On the other hand, however, in real life, we have a multitude of poor, unseen, insignificant women who can be given away, sold, or even killed by their sometimes ruthless husbands, fathers, or warlords, without getting as little as legal protection in return.

Arab societies relegate women to the private sphere as a way to protect society and other men against their harmful influence, as the whole system is based on the assumption that women are dangerous and powerful beings, being a menace to man and society, “followers and instruments of Satan, the body of women being his abode. A well-known Arab saying maintains that, ‘Whenever a man and a woman meet together, their third is always Satan’ ”.<sup>21</sup> Even Mahomet, the Prophet, saw women as dangerous creatures, “After I have gone, there will be no greater danger menacing my nation and more liable to create anarchy and trouble than women”.<sup>22</sup> Nawal El Saadawi wrote that “woman was stronger in mind and intelligence than Satan, and was able to overcome the devils and gods with her wisdom and knowledge. Eve

---

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, p.24.

<sup>21</sup> SAADAWI, Nawal El. *The Hidden Face of Eve: women in the Arab World*. Traduzido e editado por Dr. Sherif Hetata. London: Zed Books Ltd., 1993, p.136.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

triumphed over the Creator when she was able to make Adam obey her, rather than his God".<sup>23</sup> This power that Eve had over Adam scared the early fathers of religion and, as a consequence, they started using their teachings and writings as a way of subjugating women and controlling their influence over men.

The sexual segregation imposed on Arab women, as well as the use of the veil, are devices to protect men against their own uncontrolled sexuality, not women's. Saadawi wrote about the Arab woman and the use of the veil: "If for any reason she had to move outside the walls of her prison, all necessary precautions had to be taken... She was therefore enveloped in veils and flowing robes like explosive material which has to be well packed."<sup>24</sup>

The Christian doctrine of the original sin "made the association between the archetypal woman (Eve) and the prostitute a particularly straightforward one".<sup>25</sup> Although men are believed to have an overpowering sexual passion, they do not commit sin, "except if incited to do so by the seductiveness and devilry of woman".<sup>26</sup> Even the love of personal care constitutes enough reason to regard a woman as a prostitute as is seen in the teachings of Clement of Alexandria, in 1867:

If one withdrew the veil of the temple – I mean the head-dress, the dye, the clothes, the gold, the paint, the cosmetics ... with the view of finding within the true beauty, he will be disgusted... For he will not find the image of God dwelling within... but instead of it a fornicator and adulterous has occupied the shrine of the soul. And the true beast will thus be detected – an ape smeared with white paint. And the deceitful serpent, devouring the understanding part of man through vanity... this pander of a dragon has changed women into whores.<sup>27</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, p.106.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, p.137.

<sup>25</sup> TSEËLON, Efrat. *The Masque of Femininity*. London: Sage Publications, 1997, p.95.

<sup>26</sup> SAADAWI, Nawal El. *The Hidden Face of Eve: women in the Arab World*. Traduzido e editado por Dr. Sherif Hetata. London: Zed Books Ltd., 1993, p.138.

<sup>27</sup> TSEËLON, Efrat. *The Masque of Femininity*. London: Sage Publications, 1997, p.95.

On the subject of FGC, Mahomet the Prophet tried to oppose the custom since he believed it was harmful for the sexual health of women. Once, the Prophet advised a woman who performed circumcisions, "If you circumcise, take only a small part and refrain from cutting most of the clitoris off. The woman will have a bright and happy face, and is more welcome to her husband, if her pleasure is complete."<sup>28</sup> However, his advice does not seem to have been taken very seriously by the cultures which adopt FGC, since they believe that *sunna*, the mild form proposed by the Prophet, is not enough to preserve a girl's virginity and honor. Gruenbaum believes that the Arab customs such as "veiling, chaperoning, seclusion/segregation [...] can all be understood as means for maintaining the honor of the family".<sup>29</sup>

FGC is mentioned nowhere in the Koran as a mandatory procedure for women, but since the majority of the population of the biggest Islamic country in Africa, Sudan, is illiterate and ignorant of the precepts of its own religion, most Sudanese people believe that the most severe form, the pharaonic (infibulation), is one of its demands for women. It is, nonetheless, worth noting that in eighty percent of the Islamic world today the practice of FGC is unknown. It is found to a lesser extent among other religious groups such as Animists, African Coptic Christians, and a small sect of Ethiopians Jews, the Fallashas.<sup>30</sup>

Roman Catholic missionaries who went to Egypt to spread the Christian doctrine in early seventeenth century faced the tradition of FGC, and disapproved it.

---

<sup>28</sup> SAADAWI, Nawal El. *The Hidden Face of Eve: women in the Arab World*. Traduzido e editado por Dr. Sherif Hetata. London: Zed Books Ltd., 1980, p.39.

<sup>29</sup> GRUENBAUM, Ellen. *The Female Circumcision controversy: an anthropological perspective*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001, p.78.

<sup>30</sup> LIGHTFOOT-KLEIN, Hanny. *Prisoners of Ritual: an odyssey into female genital circumcision in Africa*. New York / London: Harrington Park Press, 1989, p.41-42.

As a result, the Roman Catholic priests forbade FGC. However, when the female children of the Roman Catholic converts grew up, the young converted men refused to marry them, choosing instead non-Catholic wives. As a result, the College of Cardinals in Rome was forced to rescind its decision and allow traditional genital surgeries among Egyptian Catholics. Exactly the same happened in Ethiopia in the sixteenth century. In Kenya, FGC has assumed religious significance between Christian girls, as they believe that if they do not submit to the surgery, “they will be condemned to eternal hell fire”.<sup>31</sup>

In the nineteenth century, Sir Richard Burton (1821-90), the English explorer, translator<sup>32</sup> and “Orientalist”, got in touch with the tradition of FGC during his travels in Somalia and Sudan. According to his words “this rite is supposed by Moslems to have been invented by Sarah, who so mutilated Hagar for jealousy and was afterwards ordered by Allah to have herself circumcised. It is now universal...and no Arab would marry a girl ‘unpurified’ by it” .<sup>33</sup> In the Bible, it is recognized as the story of Sarah and Hagar, Abraham’s wife and his concubine respectively. In the “Secret Book” of the Muslims, not the Koran, there is a twist of the story. Whereas in the Bible Sarah demands that Abraham banish Hagar and her son, Ishmael, to the wilderness as punishment for having had a son by Abraham, in the “Secret Book” the story takes another form, as an Imam, a spiritual leader of the Muslims explains:

Abraham offers to destroy Hagar’s beauty. Traditionally, the Imam explains calmly, to destroy a woman’s beauty you must cut her in three places. He raises his finger to his nose, then to each ear. But, he says, Sarah showed mercy for Hagar, and asked that she be

---

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, p.42.

<sup>32</sup> Sir Richard Burton is the translator of the *Kama Sutra* and of the *Arabian Nights* into English.

<sup>33</sup> (BRODIE,1967 apud GRUENBAUM,2001, p.43.)



circumcised, and instead of having her ears cut off, her ears were pierced.<sup>34</sup>

Alice Walker was attending the forum where the Imam told the story written above, when suddenly she realized that the ‘Secret Book’ of the Muslims not only explained the religious background in relation to the practice of FGC but also the original use of the veil and the chador, the black head-to-toe garment that many Muslim women still wear. Walker wrote: “Perhaps it wasn’t sickness or woman’s seductive and evil visage the veil was intended to cover, but the marks of violence”.<sup>35</sup>

FGC is easily seen and explained by Westerners as a tradition imposed by patriarchal cultures on women. However, patriarchy alone is not a sufficient reason to explain such a custom, because pervasive patriarchal social institutions exist widely, and the vast majority of cultures that do not practice FGC are also patriarchal cultures. According to anthropologist Ellen Gruenbaum “women’s and children’s social and economic subordination appears to be a necessary condition for the perpetuation of female circumcision practices”.<sup>36</sup> Dr. Saida, one of a handful of women gynecologists in Sudan, explains that:

In Sudan only 2 to 3% of women are educated at all. Until we get 50% nothing will change. As long as a woman is behind man in education she will always be dependent on him. It is largely an economic problem that we have to deal with as women. If we can change that, if women can have a say in their lives, they will be able to decide for themselves.<sup>37</sup>

---

<sup>34</sup> WALKER, Alice. *Anything We Love can be Saved*. New York: The Ballantine Publishing Group, 1997, p.39.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, p.40.

<sup>36</sup> GRUENBAUM, Ellen. *The Female Circumcision controversy: an anthropological perspective*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001, p.40.

<sup>37</sup> LIGHTFOOT-KLEIN, Hanny. *Prisoners of Ritual: an odyssey into female genital circumcision in Africa*. New York / London: Harrington Park Press, 1989, p.132.

According to Dr. Saida, and many researchers and people working against the practice of FGC, women's constraint to pursue education is behind all kinds of oppression, such as the economic dependency imposed by the lack of education and, consequently, lack of job opportunities. These factors make women vulnerable to the submission imposed by a patriarchal society. Saadawi explains the motives which lead Arab men to deprive their women from attaining economic independence:

One of the most important motives for the opposition to women's work shown by many husbands is the fear that independent earnings will lead the wife to be more conscious of her personality, and her dignity, and that therefore she will refuse to accept the humiliations she was subjected to before, refuse to be beaten or insulted or maltreated, reject her husband's playing around with other women or marrying another woman or keeping a mistress, and reject an empty and indolent life at home which saps her of any self-respect or strength to defend herself as a human being.<sup>38</sup>

Saadawi depicts in a clear way the hidden fear that most Arab men have of losing control over their subjugated wives. I understand this feeling as the main factor behind women's oppression by a patriarchal society.

It is interesting to look for evidences of matriarchal societies in order to refute the notion that patriarchy is universally found among humans. Anthropologists have discovered that the examples of matriarchy found were either mythical, as the Amazons, or represented inconsistent variations of female power. In addition, some anthropologists have mistaken the cult of women as goddesses as matriarchal societies. Even in societies where women possessed important roles in kinship systems, men were the ones with power and exercised roles of political leadership.

---

<sup>38</sup> SAADAWI, Nawal El. *The Hidden Face of Eve: women in the Arab World*. Traduzido e editado por Dr. Sherif Hetata. London: Zed Books Ltd., 1980, p.191.

Thus, it was found out that matrilineal kinship systems do not avoid women's subordination or FGC.<sup>39</sup>

According to Giorgis, the origin of the practice of FGC can be traced to the patriarchal family system, which imposed that a woman could have only one husband whereas a man could have several wives.<sup>40</sup> As a result, the restriction of women's sexuality was a necessary means for the preservation of one male's lineage. Another aspect is that a "circumcised" woman has less sexual response than an intact one, thus, the man who has many wives does not have to worry about satisfying their sexual needs. Lightfoot-Klein adds more information to the above notion:

It has been theorized that the practice of excision resulted from primitive man's desire to gain mastery over the mystery of female sexual function. By excision of the clitoris, sexual freedom in women could be curbed and women were changed from common to private property, the property of their husbands alone. Excision, since it removed the organ most easily stimulated, was thought to reduce a woman's sexual desire.<sup>41</sup>

The idea of women as private property is essential to the economic interests of a patriarchal society, as the father needs to know who his real children are for sure, in order to hand down his landed property to them. As a result, women's infidelity would lead to confusion in relation to succession and inheritance, causing a collapse of the patriarchal structure, which is built around the name of the father alone.<sup>42</sup>

---

<sup>39</sup> GRUENBAUM, Ellen. *The Female Circumcision controversy: an anthropological perspective*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001, p.42.

<sup>40</sup> (GIORGIS, 1981 apud LIGHTFOOT-KLEIN, 1989, p.28.)

<sup>41</sup> LIGHTFOOT-KLEIN, Hanny. *Prisoners of Ritual: an odyssey into female genital circumcision in Africa*. New York / London: Harrington Park Press, 1989, p.28.

<sup>42</sup> SAADAWI, Nawal El. *The Hidden Face of Eve: women in the Arab World*. Traduzido e editado por Dr. Sherif Hetata. London: Zed Books Ltd., 1980, p. 40-41.

Feminist writer Nancy Chodorow demonstrates a biological aspect of patriarchy; she argues that the responsibilities women have for child care and the time demanded by it are linked directly to and generate male dominance. In addition, she sees male dominance through a psychological approach: "Psychologists have demonstrated unequivocally that the very fact of being mothered by a woman generates in men conflicts over masculinity, a psychology of male dominance and a need to be superior to women".<sup>43</sup> It is relevant to mention that in this thesis I am not going to go deeper into the psychological reasons behind patriarchy, lest I may lose the track proposed by the work.

Some feminist theorists consider rape as one of the oldest forms of power and domination; according to Brownmiller rape "has been essential to the process of establishing male power throughout history; it has been a part of a conscious process of intimidation by which all men keep all women in a state of fear".<sup>44</sup> In relation to African women, the sexual act of an infibulated virgin is similar to rape in the sense that the man has to use all his strength in order to break into the woman. For the bride, the sexual activity during the first weeks and even months of marriage is related to pain and fear, which are the main feelings at work in cases of rape.

Nowadays, in many countries in Africa, women live in the same conditions that women used to live in the nineteenth century patriarchal American society. Eleanor Flexner describes what it was like for American women to live in those times:

Married women in particular suffered "civil death", having no right to property and no legal entity or existence apart from their husbands... Married women could not sign contracts, they had no title

---

<sup>43</sup> (CHODOROW apud NICHOLSON, 1986, p.85)

<sup>44</sup> (BROWNMILER 1975, apud HARTSOCK, 1985, p.165)

to their own earnings, to property even when it was their own by inheritance or dower, or to their children in case of legal separation.<sup>45</sup>

Lightfoot-Klein, while doing research in Sudan, came across similar social and economical conditions such as the ones faced by North American women of the nineteenth century regarding contemporary Sudanese women:

Even those few women who hold jobs in Sudan are not allowed to own property. Their wages belong to the husband, and when they are not married, their money must be managed by a male relative. The only property that a woman can really own outright is the gold that she wears on her body, which she receives as her share of the bride-price her husband must pay when they marry, or sometimes at circumcision. This gold is therefore of the utmost importance to any woman in Sudan.<sup>46</sup>

It is a fact that the economic subordination that both American and African women faced and still face is the main consequence of a patriarchal society and oppression on women. This power inhibits contemporary Sudanese women from controlling their lives even when they work, because they cannot keep their wages. In addition, they cannot have security over their houses, as they are not allowed to own anything, not even their own children.

The most severe form of FGC, called infibulation, is believed, by the patriarchal cultures which practice it, to be a guarantee of a young woman's virginity at the time of marriage. Virginity maintains the honor of the family and it is the key for a successful

---

<sup>45</sup> FLEXNER apud NICHOLSON, 1986, p.48

<sup>46</sup> LIGHTFOOT-KLEIN, Hanny. *Prisoners of Ritual: an odyssey into female genital circumcision in Africa*. New York / London: Harrington Park Press, 1989, p.69.

marriage and consequently economic security for the girl. The more tightly she is sewn, the more the future husband will be assured of her purity and chastity, and more pleasure she will be able to give him sexually, as the infibulated vaginal opening is believed to offer greater friction for the husband and is considered an enhancement to male sexual response. Thus, he will not desire to take another wife. After marriage, the decrease in the woman's sexual response caused by infibulation is valued because she will be much less likely to act in a manner that would offend her husband's and her family's honor.

FGC is believed to be a custom imposed on women by men; however, there is a contradiction regarding female genital surgeries, because the women are the strongest advocates for the preservation of the practices and are the ones who perform the surgeries on the young ones. Men do not have a say on the procedures as they consider it "women's business". It is difficult for Westerners to understand how a woman who underwent this practice when she was a child – and suffers from severe pain throughout her life due to recurrent urinary tract infections, long and painful menstruation, very hard labors, and even difficulty to urinate – would allow her daughter to go through the same suffering. If men consider this women's business, why don't women just decide not to impose it any longer on their daughters, and end the pain? The main reason behind all that is that there is an internalization of patriarchal rules in which women are not encouraged to develop their critical thinking, being blindly committed to tradition and undergoing severe economic, social and political constraints. Ultimately, lack of education is what we have at the root of those societies where female genital surgeries are practiced.

Lightfoot-Klein has gathered rich information about the Sudanese society, which she collected through her years of traveling and living in Sudan, such as the way this society treats women and the strategies women develop for survival:

The entire thing in this society is to please men. This is very much related to the fact that a woman is entirely dependent on men for her living. She is dependent on her father when she is a child, her brother, when the father is no longer able to make a living, and later on her husband. A woman in this country who does not marry has no recourse. She cannot support herself. She can have ten daughters, and still not be considered as having produced a family. She must have a son first.<sup>47</sup>

Patriarchal power, therefore, is evident in the societies where FGC is performed, and this oppression related to women's freedom of opportunities and choices can be said to be at the core of FGC.

### **2.3 Colonialism and Post-colonialism**

During the colonial period of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the African countries where FGC is performed, missionaries, colonial administrators and health personnel were highly negative regarding the custom of FGC. They tried to stop it, but faced resistance on the part of the cultures involved, as these saw the colonialists' influence exclusively as a guise for imperialism, being the protection of the tradition of FGC a way found by African societies to oppose the colonial governments.

Tashi, the African protagonist in the novel *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992), is a good example of this Colonial opposition, since the main reason behind her

decision to undergo the practice of FGC is the fact that she sees the Colonialists' presence in the Olinka village as a threat and an offense to their traditions and lifestyle. As a result, she positions herself politically against the Colonialists and voluntarily submits to the knife of M'Lissa as a way of preserving her tribal identity and traditional values.

Former Kenyan president Jomo Kenyatta published a book entitled *Facing Mount Kenya* (1938), in which he argues strongly in favor of FGC, as he sees British colonial criticism of it as cultural imperialism.<sup>48</sup> Jean Davison, in his book *Voices from Mutira*, (1989) reports that in Kenya, during the 1930s and 1940s, FGC was held as "central to the Gikuyu way of life" and a "symbol of ethnic pride pitted against colonial domination".<sup>49</sup>

Sudan was subjected to Ottoman colonialism from 1821 until 1895. Three years later, the British took control (1898-1956). In 1946, the British colonial government passed a law in Sudan which forbade infibulation. As a result, almost immediately the whole population of Sudan infibulated its daughters, many still in infancy, resulting in many deaths. In 1956, Sudan shook off colonial control and in 1974 passed its own law prohibiting infibulation, but clitoridectomy (excision of the clitoris) remained permissible by law.<sup>50</sup>

Unlawful circumcision: 1. Section 284 A(I). Whoever voluntarily causes hurt to the external genital organs of a woman is said, save as hereinafter excepted, to commit unlawful circumcision. Exceptions: It is

---

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, p.131-132.

<sup>48</sup> GRUENBAUM, Ellen. *The Female Circumcision controversy: an anthropological perspective*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001, p.25.

<sup>49</sup> (DAVISON, 1989 apud GRUENBAUM, 2001, p.103)

<sup>50</sup> LIGHTFOOT-KLEIN, Hanny. *Prisoners of Ritual: an odyssey into female genital circumcision in Africa*. New York / London: Harrington Park Press, 1989, p.43.



not an offense against this section merely to remove the free and projecting part of the clitoris . . . <sup>51</sup>

FGC was discussed outside Africa for the first time in the late 1930's, by the British Parliament. France, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom were the forerunners in the passage of anti-FGC legislation and in 1978 France began to prosecute cases of FGC as child abuse.<sup>52</sup> In 1979 Africans and non-Africans met for the first time to discuss the issue of FGC. The forum took place in Khartoum, Sudan, and was called the *World Health Organization-sponsored Conference on Traditional Practices Affecting the Health of Women and Children*. The solutions headed towards women's education and the fundamental need for grassroots involvement in the movement against FGC.<sup>53</sup>

In 1984 the World Health Organization brought Africans and Westerners together again in Dakar, Senegal. This forum resulted in the creation of the Inter-African Committee on Traditional Practices Affecting the Health of Women and Children (IAC). This organization receives funds from UNICEF, the UN's Population Fund (UNFPA), the World Health Organization, as well as from international NGOs .<sup>54</sup>

Former Kenyan president Daniel Moi (1978-2002), successor to Kenyatta, took a strong stand against the practice of FGC. In 1982 he stated that "whoever will be found committing the act or encouraging it will be prosecuted". Also, he called it a

---

<sup>51</sup> (EL DAREER 1982, apud BOYLE;PREVES,2000)

<sup>52</sup>(WINTER, 1994 apud BOYLE;PREVES,2000)

<sup>53</sup> (SMITH, 1995 apud BOYLE;PREVES,2000)

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

money-making scheme and advised Kenyans to maintain cultural values that were beneficial and to discard those that were useless.<sup>55</sup>

Egyptian doctor and feminist Nawal El Saadawi also condemns the economic interests that underlie the practices of FGCs: “The thousands of ‘dayas’, nurses, paramedical staff and doctors, who make money out of female circumcision, naturally resist any change in these values and practices which are a source of gain to them”.<sup>56</sup>

Although laws have been passed by some African governments in Egypt, Kenya and Sudan in order to end FGC, they have not been effective due to the fact that these laws “were by-products of external pressure and did not reflect the desire of the local people to suppress the tradition”.<sup>57</sup> African women have other, much more basic and urgent needs in their lives such as clean water and food to prevent their children from dying. Consequently, they do not have FGC at the top of their priorities as an urgent issue compared to their total lack of economic and social conditions.

From the 1970s onwards, the subject of FGC has gained international attention and has always been highly emotionally debated among Westerners working on its abolishment. Although these oppositionists have an unquestionable well-intended commitment to the cause, African women who are activists against the practice of FGC do not usually welcome outsiders. As a result, they “resent such involvement as an invasion of privacy, as an interference in African affairs, and as yet another form of

---

<sup>55</sup> (NAIROBI TIMES, 1982 apud LIGHTFOOT-KLEIN, 1989, p.44)

<sup>56</sup> SAADAWI, Nawal El. *The Hidden Face of Eve: women in the Arab World*. Traduzido e editado por Dr. Sherif Hetata. London: Zed Books Ltd., 1993, p.41.

<sup>57</sup> SLACK apud GRUENBAUM, 2001, p.205

imperialism”.<sup>58</sup> Even Dr. Saadawi is against foreign groups’ interference on the issue of FGC:

That kind of help, which they think of as solidarity, is another type of colonialism in disguise. So we must deal with female circumcision ourselves. It is our culture, we understand it, when to fight against it and how, because this is the process of liberation.<sup>59</sup>

Nowadays African immigrants have taken the custom of FGC to European and North-American countries, and the governments of these countries are creating laws in order to face this new situation. According to Gruenbaum, “as the interconnectedness of the world’s peoples increase, the issue of the harm to the health of women and girls become a global concern”.<sup>60</sup>

In 1996 the United States passed a federal anti-FGC law making it a crime to perform FGC, in the U.S., on girls under eighteen years of age.<sup>61</sup> Nowadays American consulates abroad are required to inform applicants for immigration that FGC is not tolerated in the country.<sup>62</sup> The Centers for Disease Control and prevention showed that in 1990 there were an estimated 168,000 girls and women living in the United States with or at risk for FGC.<sup>63</sup> According to Dorkenoo, “customs from native lands serve to retain some linkage with homelands for immigrants and may persist for several generations”.<sup>64</sup> Another aspect of FGC found in immigrant communities is that

---

<sup>58</sup> LIGHTFOOT-KLEIN, Hanny. *Prisoners of Ritual: an odyssey into female genital circumcision in Africa*. New York / London: Harrington Park Press, 1989, p.167.

<sup>59</sup> (SAADAWI apud GRUENBAUM, 2001, p.204)

<sup>60</sup> GRUENBAUM, Ellen. *The Female Circumcision controversy: an anthropological perspective*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001, p.30.

<sup>61</sup> Federal Prohibition of female Genital Mutilation Act of 1996. Public Law 104-140, 110 Stat. 1327; 1996.

<sup>62</sup> GRUENBAUM, p.208-209.

<sup>63</sup> JONES, Wanda K. et al. Who is at risk in the U.S.? *Public Health Reports*, local, v.112, p.368-77, S/O’ 97.

<sup>64</sup> DORKENOO E., 1995 apud JONES et al. , 1997

“families may return with or send their daughters back to their homelands to carry out the procedure”.<sup>65</sup> In France, traditional practitioners and parents have been brought to trial as a result of performing FGC while living in France. And in both the United States and France, African women have requested political asylum to avoid forced FGC on themselves or their daughters. <sup>66</sup>

It is relevant to mention that many African women in exile, once they get in touch with a culture which is totally different from their own, come to realize that FGC is not a universal practice and, as a result, start questioning the issue of FGC. While in their homeland the practice of FGC and the pain involved is seen as something necessary in order to become a woman, in exile they are confronted with societies where pain is considered unnecessary and something that should be avoided. This new reality can transform the experience from “ritual to accidental” and the pain from “necessary and meaningful to unnecessary and even destructive”. Even the term ‘circumcision’, which is used in their homelands, may be understood by women in exile as ‘amputation’ or ‘mutilation’ .<sup>67</sup> These internal transformations may bring about serious psychological consequences for women in exile. That is exactly what happens with Tashi, our African character, once she moves to the United States and faces a reality and society which is totally different from her previous life and culture. Tashi suffers psychologically when she perceives that her sense of identity is being dissolved amid those new Western values and beliefs.

---

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> LANE, Sandra D.; RUBINSTEIN, Robert A.. “Judging the Other Responding to Traditional Female Genital Surgeries”. *The Hastings Center Report*, v.26, p.31-40, My/Je 1996’.

<sup>67</sup> JOHANSEN, Elise B. Pain as a Counterpoint to Culture: Toward an Analysis of pain Associated with Infibulation among Somali Immigrants in Norway. *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* , local, v.16, n.3, p.312-40, S 2002

Interviews conducted by Sandra Lane in rural areas near Alexandria and Cairo in Egypt indicate that the practices of FGC are being modernized, not abandoned. Many parents with better economic conditions are choosing to have their daughters' surgeries performed by doctors, with local anesthesia and less risk of infection. Another aspect of modern FGC is the temporary migration of husbands, who labor in foreign countries for years-long periods. As a result, the practice of FGC is kept as a protection against the dishonor of the far away husband, since it is believed to calm women's sexual needs. In addition, many Egyptian girls stay longer in school than they used to stay in the past, and many Egyptian women are working outside the home for economic reasons. Thus, since total control of women's movements is impossible, FGC is seen as a protection and as an effective way to keep women's and their families' honor intact.

#### **2.4 Gender, Aesthetics and Feminism**

In the societies where FGC is performed the gender relations are very clearly established between male and female roles. Women have to be circumcised and remain virgins until the day of their marriages. After marriage, they live for their husbands and family and usually have many children, preferably boys. Men, on the other hand, are the providers, responsible for their families' income, and the keepers of the family's honor. As a result, FGC plays an extremely important role in the lives of women in those societies, as it is a guarantee that they will be accepted by their future husbands and thus, have some economic security.

Gruenbaum associates FGC with “enclosure, socially defined propriety and purity, and the gender-appropriate areas of adult roles – interiors of houses for women and the exterior, public sphere for men”.<sup>68</sup> In Sudan, “the construction of smooth scar tissue is seen as feminizing, producing enclosure”<sup>69</sup>.

Without FGC, girls would produce an ambiguity of gender, they would become “hermaphrodites”, as they would have a vagina and an elongated clitoris which would resemble a penis. Androgyny would be the outcome of an uncut woman, and her identity would transcend gender differences. In the cultures where circumcisions are performed “excision is practiced to clearly distinguish the sex of the person. A boy is ‘female’ by virtue of his foreskin; a girl is ‘male’ by virtue of her clitoris”.<sup>70</sup>

It is important to mention the differences between men and women regarding their opinions related to FGC. While men see it more often as a way to prevent women’s promiscuity, women “emphasize the clean, smooth, and pure body that results from circumcision as being a prerequisite for marriage and reproduction, preparing a girl’s body for womanhood and thereby conferring the right to bear children.”<sup>71</sup>

In addition, only by giving birth to sons is a woman able to advance her social position in the community. On the other hand, an uncircumcised woman is considered “impure” and unable to marry and bear legitimate children. As a result, she will not be

---

<sup>68</sup> GRUENBAUM, Ellen. *The Female Circumcision controversy: an anthropological perspective*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001, p.68-69.

<sup>69</sup> (BODDY,1989 apud GRUENBAUM 2001, p.67)

<sup>70</sup> (ASSAAD apud GRUENBAUM, 2001, p.68)

<sup>71</sup> ( BODDY,1989 apud GRUENBAUM,2001, p.79)

able to attain a position of respect in her old age.<sup>72</sup> Due to the above mentioned reasons in favor of FGC, mothers perpetuate the custom of FGC motivated by love and concern for their daughters' future, as they see this operation as a guarantee of marriage and economic and social security for their daughters.

In the highly segregated Islamic countries where FGC is performed, "women do not achieve social recognition by becoming more like men, but by becoming less like men physically, sexually and socially".<sup>73</sup> The use of veil by Muslim women is another symbol of gender difference, as the veiling is a way to differ and segregate women from men. Thus, the veiling of women is a mark of explicit distinction between sexes.

African men usually see women as the legendary and biblical Eve, an irrational being moved by instinct. Consequently, the practice of FGC is a way to curb women's uncontrolled sexuality: "The belief that uncircumcised women cannot help but exhibit an unbridled and voracious appetite for promiscuous sex is prevalent in all societies that practice female circumcision".<sup>74</sup>

I believe that the main reason behind gender imbalances in Africa is the fact that women are not encouraged to pursue education, or do not have the same educational opportunities than men; in addition, some feminist authors agree that the father-absent, mother-involved nuclear family is believed to create the gender identities which perpetuate patriarchal power and the denigration of women.<sup>75</sup>

---

<sup>72</sup> LIGHTFOOT-KLEIN, Hanny. *Prisoners of Ritual: an odyssey into female genital circumcision in Africa*. New York / London: Harrington Park Press, 1989, p40.

<sup>73</sup> (ASSAAD apud LIGHTFOOT-KLEIN, 1989, p.40)

<sup>74</sup> (GIORGIS apud LIGHFOOT-KLEIN, 1989, p.39)

<sup>75</sup> Ibid, p.147.

Anthropologist Ellen Gruenbaum searches deeper into the reasons why FGC is performed and finds out an important aspect which Westerner activists working on the abolishment of it do not see, or care about: the aesthetic reasons behind FGC:

The human desire to shape and decorate the body to accomplish a culture's aesthetic ideals is part of what is at work in the case of female circumcision practices. If one has grown up with an understanding of a generally practiced alteration as normal and other manifestations as abnormal, it is not difficult to predict that aesthetic norms will follow and that the altered state will be considered more beautiful than the unaltered. For those who practice infibulation, the resulting vulva is something they are used to and it therefore seems beautiful, even if people outside the experience find it repulsive. From that perspective a vulva without infibulation seems ugly and male.<sup>76</sup>

According to Gruenbaum, cultures which practice FGC see an infibulated vulva as normal and an intact one as abnormal. Actually, Sudanese and Egyptian women have been shocked to discover that the female researchers working on the issue had not themselves been "circumcised". As a result, the idea of normality is deeply embedded in the cultures which perform FGC, and resistance to change is predictable to be met by laws or campaigns against FGC.

Alice Walker compares FGC with aesthetic surgeries which are becoming the norm in Western societies:

In the 'enlightened' West, it is as if genital mutilation has spread over the entire body, as women (primarily) rush to change their breasts, their noses, their weight and shape – i.e., by removal of ribs and fat, and by such things as deliberate starvation.<sup>77</sup>

---

<sup>76</sup> GRUENBAUM, Ellen. *The Female Circumcision controversy: an anthropological perspective*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001, p.73

<sup>77</sup> WALKER, Alice ; PARMAR, Pratibha. *Warrior Marks: Female Genital Mutilation and the Sexual Blinding of Women*. New York: A Harvest Book, Harcourt Brace & Company, 1996, p.9-10.



Walker also criticizes African-Americans' treatment of their hair, comparing the belief in the ugliness of natural vulva in the cultures where FGC is performed with the belief in the ugliness of their naturally textured hair.<sup>78</sup> However, there is a great flaw in Walker's comparisons, as she does not take into consideration the fact that in the cultures where FGC is the rule, girls which submit to it do not have a say in the surgeries, they cannot choose the way of genital cutting they prefer, they do not even know what will happen to them during the operations. On the other hand, Western women and men who undergo aesthetic surgeries have total freedom of choice and are mainly educated adults who know very well what will happen to them, and the procedures that will be inflicted upon them.

Walker is not the only one to compare FGC with aesthetic surgeries. Some Egyptian and Sudanese feminists argue that women in Europe and North America also face serious discriminations. They condemn Westerners for not being able to link FGC with violence against women, child prostitution, breast enlargement surgery, and rape.<sup>79</sup>

Masters and Johnson's 1966 publication of *Human Sexual Response* was a mark for the Western feminist movement, as it established the centrality of the clitoris in female orgasm and rejected Freud's notion of the mature vaginal orgasm. As a result, "feminists in the seventies linked their aspirations for autonomy and self-determination with control over their sexuality (their clitorises), and rejected notions that women's genitals were shameful, ugly, and dirty".<sup>80</sup> Feminist author Marylin

---

<sup>78</sup> Ibid, p.14.

<sup>79</sup> LANE, Sandra D.; RUBINSTEIN, Robert A.. "Judging the Other Responding to Traditional Female Genital Surgeries". *The Hastings Center Report*, v.26, p.31-40, My/Je 1996'.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

French wrote that the main reason behind FGC might be the autonomy that a woman can have, since pleasure is under a woman's control and men are jealous of this power.<sup>81</sup>

In the African countries, the feminist movement has had some important figures such as Sudanese activist Fatima Ahmed Ibrahim and Egyptian feminist Huda Hanim Shaarawi, founder of the first women's organization in Egypt in 1923. In 1955 Ibrahim and some colleagues founded the *Woman's Voice* magazine, which attempted to explain the reasons behind female oppression and to clarify the position of Islam on women's status. Ibrahim has been the President of the Sudanese Women's Union since 1956 and is considered one of the most outspoken feminists in Africa. She has published two books: *Our Path to Emancipation* (1962) and *Our Harvest in Twenty Years* (1972), as well as a number of essays in several journals.

Ibrahim has criticized a huge Egyptian demonstration led by Shaarawi in which Egyptian women took off their veils as a symbol of their liberation from male oppression. According to Ibrahim "burning the veil did not mark any affirmation on women's political, social, and economic rights. Women can be veiled but liberated. The veil does not oppress women, but politics and oppressive regimes do".<sup>82</sup>

In December 2003 Fatima Ibrahim returned to Sudan after twelve years of exile and was welcomed by a crowd exceeding ten thousand people. Ibrahim has still a paramount role on the Sudanese political stage as a fighter for women's equality.

---

<sup>81</sup> FRENCH, Marilyn. *A Guerra contra as Mulheres*. Traduzido por Maria T.M. Cavallari. São Paulo: Best Seller, 1992. Tradução de : *The War Against Women*.p.139.

Today in her seventies, Ibrahim believes that “the current political context – militarization, Islamization, and suppression of rights – has sent women back in time”.<sup>83</sup>

Regarding the movement against FGC, there are controversial opinions and views between Western and Arab and African feminists working on the issue. Nahib Toubia, an important Sudanese feminist, physician, writer and leader in the movement against FGC argues:

The West has acted as though they have suddenly discovered a dangerous epidemic which they then sensationalized in international women’s forums creating a backlash of over-sensitivity in the concerned communities. They have portrayed it as irrefutable evidence of the barbarism and vulgarity of underdeveloped countries [...]. It became a conclusive validation to the view of primitiveness of Arabs, Muslims and Africans all in one blow.<sup>84</sup>

In 1980, during an international women’s conference held in Copenhagen, Nawal El Saadawi related her circumcision experience and spoke out against FGC. During the same time, another conference of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) took place in Copenhagen. In this conference, African women boycotted a panel on FGC for being insensitive to African reality.<sup>85</sup>

As mentioned previously, in section 2.3, in the countries where FGC is performed, the people involved do not accept much interference from Westerners

---

<sup>82</sup> NARRATING feminism: the woman question in the thinking of an African radical. *Differences*, local, v.15, n.2, p.152-71, Summer 2004

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> (TOUBIA, 1994 apud LANE;RUBINSTEIN, 1996)

<sup>85</sup> BOYLE, Elizabeth H.; PREVES, Sharon E. “National Politics as International Process: The Case of Anti-Female-Genital-Cutting Laws”. *Law & Society Review*, local, v.34, n.3, p.703-37, 2000.

regarding the subject. In addition, they see it as a form of neo-colonialism. This is the case with some Egyptian feminists who have evaluated their contact with American feminists as “one-sided, with the American women patronizingly trying to dictate the ‘correct’ agenda”.<sup>86</sup>

Arab and African feminists condemn Western feminists because they treat FGC as a preeminent concern, without taking the priorities of Arab and African women into consideration. Most contemporary Arab and African feminist groups focus on FGC, but other issues are also focused on their work such as women’s education and professional attainment, the revision of laws covering divorce and inheritance, and on helping women to understand their legal rights.

## 2.5 Health and Sexuality

*Women in Europe and America may not be exposed to surgical removal of the clitoris. Nevertheless, they are victims of cultural and psychological clitoridectomy. Sigmund Freud was perhaps the most famous of all those men who taught psychological and physiological circumcision of women when he formulated his theory on the psychic nature of women, described the clitoris as a male organ, and sexual activity related to the clitoris as an infantile phase, and when he maintained that maturity and mental health in a woman required that sexual activity related to the clitoris cease and be transferred to the vagina.*

Nawal El Saadawi, *The Hidden Face of Eve*

The range of after-effects related to FGC is wide and variable. I believe sexual frigidity is the one that most preoccupies Western feminist women working against

---

<sup>86</sup> (BADRAN apud LANE;RUBINSTEIN,1996)

FGC, as sexual pleasure can be viewed as one of the main conquests of Western women's liberation. Doctor Nawal El Saadawi says that "the psychic and mental health of women cannot be complete if they do not experience sexual pleasure."<sup>87</sup> Among the physical complications caused by FGC are hemorrhage, severe pain, chronic pelvic infections, urinary-tract infections, dysmenorrhea, possibly infertility and reduced fertility, difficulty in urinating, menstruating and childbirth, and even death. Dr. Mohamed Said El Rayah, a Sudanese gynecologist, describes his frustration as a physician when treating infibulated women in Sudan:

The pharaonic could hide a lot of diseases – perhaps tumors, anything. These women could not be properly diagnosed because it was impossible to introduce instruments to examine them. So they remained untreated or had to submit to operations simply to permit diagnosis.<sup>88</sup>

Female genital cutting has not been a practice found only in African and some Asian countries. In Europe, mainly in England, and North-America, FGC was performed as late as the 1940s by physicians for "the treatment and prevention of masturbation and other 'deviant' behaviors and psychological conditions such as 'hysteria', particularly for mental patients".<sup>89</sup>

It is relevant to mention that, historically, both in Eastern and Western human sexuality, the heterosexual intercourse has focused mainly on the satisfaction of the man, and this notion is still widespread in the countries where FGC is performed. As Janice Moulton puts it,

---

<sup>87</sup> SAADAWI, Nawal El. *The Hidden Face of Eve: women in the Arab World*. Traduzido e editado por Dr. Sherif Hetata. 8.ed. London: Zed Books Ltd., 1993,p.42.

<sup>88</sup> LIGHTFOOT-KLEIN, Hanny. *Prisoners of Ritual: an odyssey into female genital circumcision in Africa*. New York / London: Harrington Park Press,1989, p.12.

<sup>89</sup> (EHREN-REICH and ENGLISH,1973 apud GRUENBAUM, 2001,p.12)

Sexual intercourse is an activity in which male arousal is a necessary condition, and male satisfaction, if not also a necessary condition, is the primary aim [...] whereas female arousal and satisfaction, although they may be concomitant events occasionally, are not even constituents of sexual intercourse<sup>90</sup>.

In the countries where FGC is performed, a woman's sexual satisfaction is not taken into consideration prior or after the surgeries, as the only concern faced by African women is to please their men. Their own pleasure is totally irrelevant and there is a belief that the tighter a woman is sewn, the more satisfaction she will be able to give to her husband during intercourse.

There is a trend of performing FGC on very young girls, as they are easier to control, thus, there is less damage to the genital area. In addition, the young ones put up no resistance, being totally unaware of what will happen to them. There is also a belief that the surgery is less psychologically traumatic when performed on a younger girl, as she cannot remember the operation very well. Alice Walker, however, disagrees with this notion because she believes that there is an enormous emotional trauma involving the procedure:

But the mother's betrayal of the child is one of the cruelest aspects of it. Children place all their love and trust in their mothers. When you think of the depth of the betrayal of the child's trust, this is an emotional wounding, which will never go away. The sense of betrayal, the sense of not being able to trust anyone, will stay with the child as she grows up. [...] There is all this unspoken pain, this unspoken suffering, that nobody is dealing with, nobody is airing, and it goes somewhere, it always does.<sup>91</sup>

---

<sup>90</sup> (MOULTON apud HARTSOCK, 1985,p.163)

<sup>91</sup> WALKER,Alice ; PARMAR, Pratibha. *Warrior Marks: Female Genital Mutilation and the Sexual Blinding of Women* . New York: A Harvest Book, Harcourt Brace & Company, 1996, p.274.

Alice Walker herself felt the sense of betrayal which she refers to when she was sent away by her parents after the accident which caused her partial blindness. This emotional wounding left deep scars in Walker's spirit. As a consequence, Walker's "unspoken pain" has been vented through her writings.

The psychological effects of FGC are seldom noticed by family members, and difficult to be studied by doctors, as very rarely young women search for psychological treatment in order to obtain psychiatric evaluation or care. Among the few females who have looked for help, diagnoses have included "loss of self-esteem; feelings of victimization; severe anxiety prior to the operations; depression associated with complications such as infection, hemorrhage, shock, septicemia, and retention of urine; chronic irritability; and sexual frustration"<sup>92</sup>. It is a fact that girls usually withdraw after the surgery, but parents usually see this phase as a time of healing and recovery.

Our character Tashi is one of the few young African women who look for treatment, probably due to the fact that she lives in the United States. There she is able to look for psychological help. However, what she finds is a professional from a very different culture, who sees her trauma from within a Western view, from a somewhat different angle. That is why, in this thesis, I decided to look for information regarding psychology and the issue of FGC from African doctors.

Sudanese psychiatrist El Tahir Abdel Rahim says that he could notice easily whether a girl had undergone FGC simply "by her bearing, by the way she spoke, by

---

<sup>92</sup> (MOEN,1983 apud LIGHTFOOT-KLEIN, 1989, p.76)

her manner, by her confidence”.<sup>93</sup> He believes that FGC affects the total growth of a young woman’s personality, as well as her self-image and will. Doctor Rahim also talks about a paradox involving some African men and women: while women feel guilty because they cannot function properly, men feel guilty for inflicting so much pain on their wives during intercourse. As a result, feelings of rejection and alienation were found in both sexes.<sup>94</sup>

According to Nancy Hartsock, “there is a surprising degree of consensus that hostility and domination, as opposed to intimacy and physical pleasure, are central to sexual excitement.”<sup>95</sup> This notion is valid when evaluating the sexual relations between African men and women. For Stember, “the gratification in sexual conquest derives from the experience of defilement—of reducing the elevated woman to ‘dirty’ sexual level, of polluting that which is seen as pure, sexualizing that which is seen as unsexual, animalizing that which is seen as ‘spiritual’”.<sup>96</sup> The legendary character Don Juan is a good example of a man who finds excitement and pleasure by defiling the women he conquers. As soon as he overcomes the resistance of a woman, he loses interest and looks for another ‘prey’.

Robert Stoller believes that the desire, overt or hidden, to harm another person, generates and enhances sexual excitement. In addition, “triumph, rage, revenge, fear, anxiety and risk” are among other components of sexual excitement. For Stoller “harm and suffering” are central to sexual excitement.<sup>97</sup> It is hard to judge what lies in the

---

<sup>93</sup> LIGHTFOOT-KLEIN, Hanny. *Prisoners of Ritual: an odyssey into female genital circumcision in Africa*. New York / London: Harrington Park Press, 1989, p.12.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid, p.11.

<sup>95</sup> HARTSOCK, Nancy C.M.. *Money Sex and Power: toward a feminist historical materialism*. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1985, p.157.

<sup>96</sup> (STEMBER apud HARTSOCK, 1985, p.158)

<sup>97</sup> (STOLLER apud HARTSOCK, 1985, p.157)



minds of African men when they have to “open” their infibulated wives. The pain inflicted on those women is enormous and maybe the screams and the blood resulting from the act work as an enhancement to men’s sexual pleasure. On the other hand, men are also subject to painful intercourse, as the struggle to enter their brides’ infibulated vaginas usually causes wounds and even scars on their penises.<sup>98</sup> Potency problems are also found among African men due to extreme anxiety in relation to their capability of entering their brides’ bodies.<sup>99</sup>

Stoller goes further in his argument when he states that “the hostility in sexual excitement grows out of traumas and frustrations intimately connected with and threatening to the development of masculinity or femininity.”<sup>100</sup> He also suggests that the sexual excitement will take place at the moment when “adult reality resembles the childhood trauma – the anxiety being re-experienced as excitement”.<sup>101</sup> In addition, Stoller hypothesizes that the traumas re-created in sexual excitement are mainly memories of childhood traumas related to sexual anatomy and gender identification.<sup>102</sup>

Stoller’s arguments make sense when we analyze African male and female relation towards sex and their respective developments of masculinity and femininity. African boys are deprived of sex and are encouraged to refrain from masturbation. Frustration is probably the result of such demands, as they cannot explore and develop their sexuality in a natural and acceptable way. For women, the development of their sexuality is related to the practice of FGC, as they believe that the operation is

---

<sup>98</sup> (ALMROTH, 2000 apud JOHANSEN, 2002)

<sup>99</sup> LIGHTFOOT-KLEIN, Hanny. *Prisoners of Ritual: an odyssey into female genital circumcision in Africa*. New York / London: Harrington Park Press, 1989, p.11.

<sup>100</sup> (STOLLER apud HARTSOCK, 1985, p.159)

<sup>101</sup> Ibid, p.169.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

a key to womanhood. Thus, for both girls and boys there is a great deal of frustration and trauma involved in the development of their sexuality. As a result, hostility, alienation and rejection are among the feelings at work between African couples.

Doctor Hassabo, another Sudanese psychiatrist, explains that many African men only have their first sexual experience when married, sometimes in their 30s and 40s. This delay is due to economic reasons, as they have to work hard and save money in order to pay for the young bride's dowry. For these men, continuous suppression of their sexual needs is demanded and usually this takes the form of religious fanaticism. Dr. Hassabo sees the ritual of praying six times a day as a way of feeding these men's emotional emptiness.<sup>103</sup> Dr. Saadawi describes some consequences that might occur from unsatisfied sexual energy:

Recent advances in psychology have shown that unsatisfied sexual energy is not transformed into productive cultural or intellectual creation but rather tends to be diverted away from its normal course, leading to all sorts of blocks and inhibitions resulting from the storage of internal energy and ending up causing sexual deviations and nervous and other psychological disorders<sup>104</sup>.

For many women who underwent FGC, sexual activity became a burden in their lives; the only reason they have intercourse with their husbands is to please them and to procreate. These women are unable to process their trauma mentally, as some doctors in Sudan observe, "there is no doubt that circumcision is a source of sexual and psychological shock to the girl, and leads to varying degrees of sexual

---

<sup>103</sup> LIGHTFOOT-KLEIN, Hanny. *Prisoners of Ritual: an odyssey into female genital circumcision in Africa*. New York / London: Harrington Park Press, 1989, p.150.

<sup>104</sup> SAADAWI, Nawal El. *The Hidden Face of Eve: women in the Arab World*. Traduzido e editado por Dr. Sherif Hetata. 8.ed. London: Zed Books Ltd., 1993, p.130.

aversion".<sup>105</sup> It took African immigrant women living in Norway from one to three years of treatment, before they were able to tell their psychologists about the experience.<sup>106</sup> These women have silenced their suffering for so long, that it makes it really difficult for them to speak out about this unspoken pain. Dr. Yahia Oun Alla, a Sudanese psychiatrist, clarifies some psychological consequences of FGC on women:

Some girls are basically emotionally unstable. The ones with hysteria are brought to the clinic most frequently. They are usually frigid, and every attempt at sexual contact does no more than reinforce this response in them. Sex is totally unrewarding to them, and this is why they wind up in my office. Their lack of gratification brings about a very unpleasant psychological reaction. They suffer from nervous tension, irritability, literally 'hysteria'.<sup>107</sup>

There is a widely shared cultural belief among African women that women have to go through three ordeals in life: "circumcision", marriage and giving birth. The African woman suffers severe pain during the most important moments of her life. Moments which should be remembered with satisfaction are frequently remembered as the most painful of their lives. "It is the pain when the infibulation is done, the pain when it has to be opened again at marriage, and the pain when it has to be further opened when giving birth".<sup>108</sup> Many women before giving birth have nightmares about their circumcisions and the pain involved, which is revived at the time of their babies' delivery.

---

<sup>105</sup> LIGHTFOOT-KLEIN, Hanny. *Prisoners of Ritual: an odyssey into female genital circumcision in Africa*. New York / London: Harrington Park Press, 1989, p.98.

<sup>106</sup> JOHANSEN, Elise B. Pain as a Counterpoint to Culture: Toward an Analysis of pain Associated with Infibulation among Somali Immigrants in Norway. *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*, local, v.16, n.3, p.312-40, S 2002

<sup>107</sup> (LIGHTFOOT-KLEIN, 1989 p.136)

<sup>108</sup> JOHANSEN, Elise B. Pain as a Counterpoint to Culture: Toward an Analysis of pain Associated with Infibulation among Somali Immigrants in Norway. *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*, local, v.16, n.3, p.312-40, S 2002

The clitoris is the most erotically sensitive organ in females. However, in women that have been clitoridectomized, other parts of the body usually take over this erotic function, such as the labia minora, the breasts, and the lips.<sup>109</sup> Although for the great majority of 'circumcised' women sex is related only to their husbands' satisfaction, a small number are able to reach orgasm. This is possible due to the presence of a G-spot embedded deep in the vagina which makes the orgasmic experiences of "circumcised" women possible, since the local is protected from the direct effects of cutting of the external genital tissues. "Even a severely infibulated woman would still have a G-spot from which to derive erogenous sensation".<sup>110</sup> This orgasmic experience is more common when there is a strong feeling of love towards the husband. However, as the great majority of marriages are arranged, the difficulties of reaching orgasm increase due to a lack of emotional bond in the relationship.

I agree with most researches that there is a strong link between the AIDS epidemics in Africa and the practice of FGC. Usually, the operations are communal, and the 'circumciser' uses only one blade. She uses the same blood soiled blade from one child to the next. As a result, if the circumciser is a carrier of AIDS, she can transmit the disease to the girls, or if one of the children is a carrier she can transmit it to the other girls as well. Another connection that is possible is my belief that a great number of African men practice anal sex prior to marriage, as the great majority of men do not have access to women in their youth. Once they get married, there is a lot of blood involved in 'opening' an infibulated woman. As a result, if the man is a carrier of HIV, he will transmit it to his new wife almost immediately.

---

<sup>109</sup> (MEGAFU, 1983 apud LIGHTFOOT-KLEIN, 1989, p.92)

<sup>110</sup> GRUENBAUM, Ellen. *The Female Circumcision controversy: an anthropological perspective*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001, p.152.

Due to Alice Walker's great concern about the cause of FGC, I will close this section and chapter with her words:

Genital mutilation is a mental and physical health hazard that directly affects some one hundred million women and girls worldwide, alive today, to whom it has been done. Because of increased risk of trauma during delivery, it affects the children to whom they give birth. Indirectly, because of its linkage to the spread of AIDS, especially among women and children, it affects the health and well-being of everyone on the planet.<sup>111</sup>



---

<sup>111</sup> WALKER, Alice. *Anything We Love can be Saved*. New York: The Ballantine Publishing Group, 1997,p.191

### 3 TASHI IN THE NOVELS

*Like The Temple of My Familiar, it is a return to the original world of The Color Purple only to pick up those characters and events that refused to leave my mind. Or my spirit. Tashi, who appears briefly in The Color Purple and again in The Temple of My Familiar, stayed with me, uncommonly tenacious, through the writing of both books, and led me finally to conclude she needed, and deserved, a book of her own.*

**Alice Walker**, *Possessing the Secret of Joy*

#### 3.1 *The Color Purple*

Critical Views:

*In its depiction of rape, wife-beating, genital mutilation, and facial scarification, The Color Purple abounds with instances in which authority is inscribed on the human body. In the text, a patriarchy maintains power by rewriting the female body into powerlessness, thus denying the woman's ability to authorize herself. (Wendy Wall)<sup>1</sup>*

*Walker's didacticism is especially evident in Nettie's letters from Africa which make up a large portion of the book. Nettie relates the story of the Olinka tribe, particularly of one girl Tashi, as a kind of feminist fable. (Dinitia Smith)<sup>2</sup>*

---

<sup>1</sup> GATES, Henry Louis Jr. (ed.); Appiah, K.A. **Alice Walker** : critical perspectives past and present. New York: Amistad Press, Inc., 1993,p.261.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p.20.

*If there is a weakness in this novel - besides the somewhat pallid portraits of the males - it is Nettie's correspondence from Africa. While Nettie's letters broaden and reinforce the theme of female oppression by describing customs of the Olinka tribe that parallel some found in the American South, they are often monologues on African history. Appearing, as they do, after Celie's intensely subjective voice has been established, they seem lackluster and intrusive. (Mel Watkins)<sup>3</sup>*

*The Color Purple* is Alice Walker's most famous work. It is a rich literary text to be analyzed through the feminist critical approach due to its wide variety of important and urgent issues dealt in the story such as incest, domestic violence, lesbianism, racism, sexism and, last but not least, female genital cutting (FGC).

*The Color Purple* has the structure of an epistolary novel, and can be divided into two halves: the first part is composed of letters written by the African-American protagonist, Celie, in which she confides to God; and the other half are letters written by her sister Nettie, while living in Africa, to Celie, who lives in the United States. The description that Nettie makes of the Africans, when she sets foot in Senegal, is extremely realistic, and this vivid description could only be portrayed so well through Walker's own experiences in Africa. The African culture that Walker depicts is shocking to the Western readers of *The Color Purple*. This can be observed, for example, when Nettie writes: "A girl is nothing to herself, only to her husband can she

---

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p.18.

become something”.<sup>4</sup> As a result, oppression and domination by the patriarchal society can be perceived as an international norm in the novel.

The African character Tashi appears for the first time in a letter written by Nettie, who is an African-American Christian missionary working in the Olinka village, in Africa. In the letter, Nettie tells Celie about the ways boys treat the girls who dare go to school. This is the case of Olivia, Celie’s daughter, who was adopted by a couple of missionaries and is being raised by her aunt Nettie. Olivia is the only girl who attends school in Olinka, probably because she is the only foreign girl living in the village. In Nettie’s words, “She has a little girl, Tashi, who plays with Olivia after school. Adam is the only boy who will speak to Olivia at school. They are not mean to her, it is just – what is it? Because she is where they are doing ‘boy’s things’, they do not see her”.<sup>5</sup> Boy’s things in the Olinka village and society mean to pursue education, which girls are not allowed. Thus Walker, through Nettie’s letters, explores one of the main themes which run throughout *The Color Purple*: sex roles.

In the same letter Olivia asks her aunt Nettie why her friend Tashi is not encouraged to attend school, “Why can’t Tashi come to school? She asked me. When I told her the Olinka don’t believe in educating girls she said, quick as a flash, they’re like white people at home who don’t want colored people to learn”.<sup>6</sup> This comparison made by Olivia shows Walker’s recurrent commitment in her work with the causes of racism and sexism; through Nettie’s letters, the readers are able to make a connection between the African and the American culture. This comment by Olivia ratifies the argument, in Chapter Two, where I extensively argue about the lack

---

<sup>4</sup> WALKER, Alice . *The Color Purple*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1985,p.162.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.



of education for African girls as being in the core of the continuity of the tradition of FGC in our days. Walker does not make this connection overtly in *The Color Purple*, the novel merely exposes the way women are treated in patriarchal African societies.

In the Olinka village, the missionaries find it very difficult to pass their 'superior' Christian doctrine to the villagers. Missionary Samuel tries to influence women towards preferring monogamy to polygamy; however, polygamy is the rule among the Olinkans. In addition, the "husband has life and death power over the wife. If he accuses one of his wives of witchcraft or infidelity, she can be killed".<sup>7</sup> This attitude towards women makes it a barrier for the missionaries to spread their teachings. Another aspect that puzzles the missionaries is the fact that the wives who share a husband have a very strong bond among themselves, a special sisterhood, where they help each other. This fellowship makes them somehow powerful in relation to the married Christian missionary Corrine, who becomes lonely and weak if compared to the other wives. Her ambiguous relationship with Nettie – who helps with the education of her children – is not very well understood by the Olinkans. In addition, Corrine becomes jealous of the relationship between her husband Samuel and Nettie. Because Nettie is single, she is looked askance by the Olinka people. To them, she is a non-person, "the missionary drudge", an "object of pity and contempt". Only through marriage can a woman become whole and obtain certain status within the Olinka society.

In our Western world too, until quite recently, marriage was also the key for a woman's economic survival. Probably, in many spheres, it still is. From the father's

---

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p.172.

economic support and control, woman passed to her husband's support and control. Women were not encouraged to pursue traditional education and consequently, to work. As a result, adjectives such as "old maid" and "spinster" still show a great deal concerning the social prejudice cast against women who do not succeed in the enterprise of getting married. The female protagonists in the English and Brazilian novels of the nineteenth century clearly show the desperate attempts to move away from the position of being a "non-person," and to attain a social standing through an honorable marriage within the system. Those who failed to reach this goal were doomed to become a burden to society. In fiction (as in life?) they often ended up ill, died from a "broken-heart" or became insane.

As the story advances, more girls start attending classes in Olinka, which is a great progress in such a small and culturally restricted community. "The boys now accept Olivia and Tashi in class and more mothers are sending their daughters to school. The men do not like it: who wants a wife who knows everything her husband knows? They fume."<sup>8</sup> This progress for the girls is probably possible due to the missionaries' work and influence on the villagers.

In one of her letters, Nettie mentions that Tashi and Olivia seem to be involved in a physical relationship, as when she writes, "she and Tashi tend to each other is my guess". This comment is very subtle, and in *The Color Purple*, there is nothing wrong in a woman turning to another woman for friendship or for sexual intimacy, as is the case of Celie and Shug. Lesbianism is seen as something natural for Walker's women's characters.

The way Africans react in relation to colonialists is referred to in Chapter Two of this thesis. In *The Color Purple*, this view is clearly demonstrated in Nettie's letters. About Corrine, for example, "She used to say the Olinka resented us, but I wouldn't see it. But they do, you know. No, I said, it isn't resentment, exactly. It really is indifference. Sometimes I feel our position is like that of flies on an elephant's hide."<sup>9</sup> Or when Samuel, Corrine's husband, states his impression: "It's worse than unwelcome, said Samuel. The Africans don't even 'see' us. They don't even recognize us as the brothers and sisters they sold".<sup>10</sup> The missionaries feel a great disappointment in relation to the way they are taken by the Africans. They had thought that, because they were African-Americans, they would be treated as equals, but things do not happen as they expected. For the Africans, they are intruders who want to impose their culture and religion upon them.

The subject of female genital cutting (FGC) is mentioned for the first time in the novel in a letter written by Nettie to Celie: "Although the one ritual they do have to celebrate womanhood is so bloody and painful, I forbid Olivia to even think about it".<sup>11</sup> Olivia, even though she is not an Olinkan, is living in Olinka society and might be influenced by the African ideology and tradition of womanhood, which includes the practice of FGC. Nettie is aware of this and "forbids" Olivia to think about this. This shows, in a way, the permeability of the cultural exchanges involved in this link between different cultures.

---

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p.176,177.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p.242.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p.243.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p.195.

In another letter, Walker shows how the Africans try to keep to their traditions, such as face scarification and FGC as much as they can, as a way of opposing the colonialists. In Nettie's words:

It is a way the Olinka can show they still have their own ways, said Olivia, even though the white man has taken everything else. Tashi didn't want to do it, but to make her people feel better, she's resigned. She's going to have the female initiation ceremony too, she said.<sup>12</sup>

In the novel *The River Between* (1965), by male Kenyan novelist Ngugi wa Thiong'o, a similar case is portrayed. In the story, Muthoni, an adolescent girl from the Gikuyu tribe decides to undergo the practice of FGC in defiance of her preacher father, who believes the rite is sinful after his ardent conversion to Christianity. Her sister advises her:

Father will not allow it. [...] The missionaries do not like the circumcision of girls. Father has been saying so. Besides, Jesus told us it was wrong and sinful.

I know. But I want to be circumcised. [...] I want to be a woman. I want to be a real girl, a real woman, knowing all the ways of the hills and the ridges. [...] The white man's God does not satisfy me. I want, I need something more. (Ngugi 1965:25-26)<sup>13</sup>

Tashi and Muthoni have a point in common: they want to maintain their ethnic identity. Both girls have been converted to Christian religion by the Western missionaries and both feel a need to question their imposed religion and the new ways which have been adopted by their tribes uncritically. Through their decision to

---

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, p.245.

<sup>13</sup> GRUENBAUM, Ellen. *The Female Circumcision controversy: an anthropological perspective*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001, p.102.

undergo FGC, they value their heritage and roots before they are completely lost to the 'progress' brought by the colonialists.

Towards the end of the book, Adam, Celie's son, asks Tashi in marriage, as the missionary family is planning to return to the United States. She refuses, and explains why she does not want to accept it. Nettie tells Celie/us:

And then, in that honest, forthright way of hers, she gave her reasons. Paramount among them that, because of the scarification marks on her cheeks Americans would look down on her as a savage and shun her, and whatever children she and Adam might have. That she had seen the magazines we receive from home and that it was very clear to her that black people did not truly admire black-skinned black people like herself, and especially did not admire black-skinned black women. They bleach their faces, she said. They fry their hair. They try to look naked.<sup>14</sup>

Walker uses Tashi's words and Nettie's letter in the above quotation to express her own opinion and criticism regarding the African-American culture and society. Tashi is used as a metaphor and a mirror that reflects Walker's radical views. Walker, through Nettie's words, writes about an issue which is present in several of her works: racism and sexism within the Black community. In addition, the author shows her concern related to African-American women's denial of their race, by "bleaching" their faces and "frying" their hair.

Tashi's preoccupation regarding her face scarification is due to the fact that she knows that the marks carved on her face will make her forever identifiable as a

---

<sup>14</sup> WALKER, Alice . *The Color Purple*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1985, p.285,286.

member of the Olinka tribe. As a consequence, the same marks will set her apart in the Western world.

Adam, in order to feel in equal terms with Tashi, decides to scar his face as well. After this episode, Adam and Tashi get married by Adam's father and Christian preacher Samuel and return, together with Olivia, Samuel and Nettie, to the United States. Corrine dies in Africa and Nettie marries the widower Samuel.

### **3.2 The Temple of My Familiar**

Critical Views:

*As I read The Temple of My Familiar, the kaleidoscope of people and relationships occasionally daunted and confused me. I wanted just to slow down and get to know somebody better. There were times I felt like saying, "Dear Genius, please – you don't have to get it 'all' into one book"! But it's her book, and she gets it all in. (Ursula K. Le Guin)<sup>15</sup>*

*The Temple of My Familiar again bears a message from Africa, but this time in a far more determined manner. The message reaches us via Miss Lissie, an ancient goddess who has been incarnated hundreds of times, usually as a woman, sometimes as a man, once even as a lion. Less a character than a narrative device, Lissie enables Alice Walker to range back in time to the beginning of (wo)man. (J.M. Coetzee)<sup>16</sup>*

---

<sup>15</sup> GATES, Henry Louis Jr. (ed.); Appiah, K.A. **Alice Walker** : critical perspectives past and present. New York: Amistad Press, Inc., 1993, p.22,23.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, p.24.

Alice Walker spent eight years working on her fourth novel, *The Temple of My Familiar*, published in 1989. Walker describes the book as “a romance of the last 500,000 years”. *The Temple of My Familiar* is the kind of book that should be read, at least, twice. The first time is extremely confusing, as the stories move back and forth in time, and there are too many characters, some old, from *The Color Purple*, and some new, who mingle in several stories that take place in different cities, countries and continents, such as California and Baltimore, in the United States, Mexico and Africa. The second reading is, definitely, more gratifying and enriching for the reader. Walker received some negative criticism for this novel, and was philosophical about them: “I do understand that my worldview is different from that of most of the critics, [...] I can only persist in being myself”.<sup>17</sup>

Part two of *The Temple of My Familiar* has some strong connections with Walker's previous novel *The Color Purple*, as many characters are remembered through Olivia, Celie's daughter in *The Color Purple*, and her daughter Fanny Nzingha, who is married to Suwelo, one of the main characters in the novel. Olivia talks about her mother Celie, her brother Adam, her aunt Nettie, her adoptive mother Corrine, her father Samuel and their experiences while living in Africa as missionaries. Shug's and Sofia's names are also mentioned. Fanny's impressions of her mother Olivia make the readers of *The Color Purple* feel 'at home' while reading *The Temple of My Familiar*:

My mother did not particularly interest me. Whereas Big Mama (as I called Grandmama Celie) and Mama Shug (as I called Miss Shug) were always good for a kiss, a laugh, a squeeze, a ride to the garden or at least to the front porch, my mother was – dare I say

---

<sup>17</sup> DREIFUS, Claudia. “ A. Walker 'Writing to Save My Life,' ” *The Progressive*, August 1989,p.30.

it? A boring woman, who rarely laughed and always had her nose in a book.<sup>18</sup>

The issue of female genital cutting appears in the story when Olivia reflects on the roles of religions in the world:

You might say the white man, in his dual role of spiritual guide and religious prostitute, spoiled even the most literary form of God experience for us. By making the Bible say whatever was necessary to keep his plantations going, and using it as a tool to degrade women and enslave blacks. But the old African religions also, in which mutilation of women's bodies sometimes figured so prominently, left everything to be desired.<sup>19</sup>

Tashi's name is mentioned in the story by Olivia, who remembers her experiences in Africa in the company of her best friend. It is relevant to mention that the subject of Tashi's "circumcision" is never brought up in the novel:

All day long I could be found in the company of my best friend, Tashi. We played house, we splashed in the river, we collected wild foods and firewood in the forest.[...] There was nothing we did not share, and I loved her better than I would have loved my own sister, as much, or more, than I loved my brother, Adam, who, from an older boy who teased us, chased us, pulled our braids, and tattled on us to our mothers, became Tashi's confidant, then her suitor, then, many years later, her husband.<sup>20</sup>

There is one episode in *The Temple of My Familiar*, however, that introduces information that is never mentioned in *The Color Purple* or in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. These books are not a trilogy; consequently, they do not have to follow a sequence of events, but the readers inevitably expect them to be coherent, because some characters are the same in the three stories. There is a passage where Olivia

---

<sup>18</sup> WALKER, Alice . *The Temple of My Familiar*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1990, p.153.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, p.145.



mentions an affair she had with an African man named Dahvid, by whom she becomes pregnant, and also about Tashi's pregnancy. Both girls are "robust" with child by the time they set foot in the United States, around the end of World War II:

And so it was that when I returned to America with Adam and his bride, Tashi, and my father Samuel, and my aunt, Mama Nettie, I was, as my natural mother, Celie, immediately perceived – but said nothing- 'robust' with Dahvid's child. As Tashi was 'robust' with Adam's.<sup>21</sup>

In the *Temple of My Familiar*, Olivia and her adult daughter Fanny go back to Africa, more precisely, to Olinka, as Fanny wants to meet her biological father Dahvid, who is the Minister of Culture. There, Fanny meets her half-sister Nzingha and both share some deep concerns about White Imperialism. In Fanny's words:

The way things are going in the United States, I said, there will soon be more black men in prison than on the streets. In South Africa the entire black population is incarcerated in ghettos and 'homelands' they despise. Look at what was done to the Indians, and still is being done. Look at the aborigines of Australia, the Maori of New Zealand. Look at Indonesia under the Dutch. Look at the West Indies. Forgiveness isn't large enough to cover the crime.<sup>22</sup>

One of the issues that appear in most novels by Alice Walker is the White man's oppression on Black people, and *The Temple of My Familiar* could not be different. The novel brings many situations in which racism is discussed and shown with crudity, as when Fanny states: "It's racism and greed that have to go. Not white people. But can they be separated from their racism?"<sup>23</sup> Another issue that concerns

---

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, p.147.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, p.150.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, p.308.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, p.302.

Walker is the White man's destruction of our planet's health. Throughout the novel, many allusions are made about how White men are destroying the nature by polluting the rivers and the air, among other harms, as we can see in the example below:

Do you think they know what they are doing when they suck all the oil out of the earth on one side of the world and complain about earthquakes on the other?<sup>24</sup>

Walker, through the characters of Carlotta and Fanny, approaches the issue of Western women's aesthetics, or as she puts it, "body torture", as when women wear extremely uncomfortable shoes in order to look sexy in the eyes of men. A dialogue between Fanny and Carlotta:

"Women wear things that hurt them to atone for the sin of loving someone they'd rather not. Someone they may actually consider unworthy of them. It's sometimes called 'seduction'."

Maybe it was true, I thought. I wore the kind of shoes you'd liked me to wear, though they hurt and you'd left me for my mother, who always wore flats.<sup>25</sup>

Walker has demonstrated, through her writings, her disapproval regarding women's "body tortures" in order to become more aesthetically pleasing for themselves and their men. This issue has been brought up previously on this thesis.

In *The Color Purple*, there is a scene in which Shug teaches Celie how to masturbate. It is very didactic, as if there is a political wish, on the part of the author, to help women to discover their own bodies and the freedom that masturbation provides. In *The Temple of My Familiar*, the issue of masturbation is again brought

---

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, p.307.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, p.294.

up by Fanny, who rediscovers her body and her sexuality. This scene is, in my point of view, one of the most 'womanist' and committed in Walker's work:

Fanny thinks of the years during which her sexuality was dead to her. How, once she began to understand men's oppression of women, and to let herself feel it in her own life, she ceased to be aroused by men. By Suwelo in particular, addicted as he was to pornography. And then, the women in her consciousness-raising group had taught her how to masturbate. Suddenly she'd found herself free. Sexually free, for the first time in her life. At the same time, she was learning to meditate, and was throwing off the last clinging vestiges of organized religion. She was soon meditating and masturbating and finding herself dissolved into the cosmic All. Delicious.<sup>26</sup>

### 3.3 Possessing the Secret of Joy

Critical Views:

*[...] but one does not have to read many pages of Possessing the Secret of Joy to realize that Alice Walker has not foisted her subject – female circumcision – upon us, instead, this writer of bold artistry challenges us to feel and to think. Here is a novel – and a subject – whose time has surely come. (Charles R. Larson)<sup>27</sup>*

*But once again, as she did so stunningly and accessibly in The Color Purple, Alice Walker takes her readers into formerly taboo territory – areas of the human soul usually shrouded in silence and shame and fear and anguish. She insists that we look at what we would rather pretend doesn't exist, that we hear what we want to close our ears to. (Tina Mcelroy Ansa)<sup>28</sup>*

---

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, p.386.

<sup>27</sup> GATES, Henry Louis Jr. (ed.); Appiah, K.A. **Alice Walker** : critical perspectives past and present. New York: Amistad Press, Inc., 1993, p.27.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, p.32.

*Possessing the Secret of Joy* is about the “telling” of suffering and the breaking of taboos. And when taboos are broken, new forms and modes of discourse must evolve to contain that which has previously been unspeakable.[...] It is a work that sits uneasily within the category of “the novel”, though the breakers of taboos must always redefine the terms and the rules of the game. (Janette Turner Hospital)<sup>29</sup>

The novel *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992) starts with an epigraph that explains the title of the book, “There are those who believe Black people possess the secret of joy and that it is this that will sustain them through any spiritual or moral or physical devastation”. This idea that Black people “possess the secret of joy” can be as harmful as, in our Brazilian culture, the myth that “Brazilians are a happy people”. Maybe they even have the same origin, if we consider the great number of Brazilians that are African descendants, because this idea is usually connected to the internationally known Brazilian Carnival and football, where the Black influence predominates, and establishes the festive atmosphere.

This notion has a positive side, since it helps the maintenance of one's cheerful disposition and self-respect. However, there is a negative side as well, as Black people can become passive and just accept life positively as it is. In an individual aspect, the young African protagonist in the novel, Tashi, used to possess her secret of joy, which was her sexual pleasure, her wholeness, but due to her submission to the practice of FGC she voluntarily puts an end on this “joy”.

---

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, p.30.

In the beginning of *Possessing the Secret of Joy* the text is preceded by a copy of a whole page from *The Color Purple*. This page situates the readers in relation to the continuation of Tashi's saga, which started in *The Color Purple*, when she was a little girl, and later an adolescent and young woman. However, there is a contradiction: on this page Olivia mentions that "when we left, she was planning to scar her face". But in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, Tashi leaves the Olinka village and joins the Mbeles camp in order to undergo FGC. As previously mentioned, the books do not mean to form a trilogy, and some events that occur in one book do not coincide with the others. Alice Walker's explanation is that:

Though obviously connected, *Possessing the Secret of Joy* is not a sequel to either *The Color Purple* or *The temple of My Familiar*. Because it is not, I have claimed the storyteller's prerogative to recast or slightly change events alluded to or described in the earlier books, in order to emphasize and enhance the meanings of the present tale.<sup>30</sup>

Then there is the second epigraph. There is a "bumper sticker" which reads, "When the axe came into the forest, the trees said the handle is one of us". According to Angeletta Gourdine, "this sentence provides the cultural context within which Walker positions her story".<sup>31</sup> Gourdine expands her comment stating that:

The forest, the wilderness, and the dark continent are at once Africa and black women's bodies. [...] The blade represents the institution of patriarchy, and though it actually cuts – severs - the trees' bodies, much like those blades which remove women's clitorises, the hands that hold it, that maintain it are themselves trees, women who are gears in the political machinery of patriarchy.<sup>32</sup>

---

<sup>30</sup> WALKER, Alice . *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993, p.283,284.

<sup>31</sup> GOURDINE, Angeletta K. M. Postmodern ethnography and the womanist mission: postcolonial sensibilities in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. *African American Review*, Summer 1996. Available at: <[http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m2838/is\\_n2\\_v30/ai\\_18571822/pg\\_1](http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m2838/is_n2_v30/ai_18571822/pg_1)>

Access: June 8<sup>th</sup> 2005.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

Before writing this novel, Walker did an extensive research about the issue of female genital cutting. Some books that she read coincide with the ones that I have read in my own research, as is the case of Hanny Lightfoot-Klein's excellent book on the subject, *Prisoners of Ritual: An Odyssey into Female Genital Circumcision in Africa* (1989). As a result, I was able to identify many passages from *Prisoners of Ritual* which Walker used in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. It is interesting to analyze how the information she gathered in her research was used with artistry in the form of fiction.

*Possessing the Secret of Joy* is composed of twenty-one parts. They are not numbered. Instead, they bear the name of the character who is speaking. The story does not follow a chronological order, and the events move back and forth in time and places. There are several characters, some from her previous novels *The Color Purple* and *The Temple of My Familiar*, and others that are new. Nako Nontsasa mentions the double-consciousness strategy that Walker uses in her novel, "The multiplicity of voices is a stylistic device and does not offer divergent perspectives, while the narrative is fragmented, the story is thematically monolithic".<sup>33</sup>

After Tashi's "circumcision", she marries Adam and moves to the United States where she changes her name into Evelyn Johnson. This adoption of a Western name damages the preservation of her identity, which is being threatened by the new society and culture, which she adores and seems to adopt as her own. In the United States Tashi realizes that she is different from the other women and starts regarding

---

<sup>33</sup> NONTASASA, Nako. Possessing the Voice of the Other: African Women and the "Crisis of Representation" in Alice Walker's *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. *Jenda: A Journal of Culture and African Women Studies*. 2001.

her operation as a form of mutilation instead of circumcision. The character Tashi can therefore be subdivided into three different voices: sometimes the one who is speaking is the original, “true” African woman. In such moments, the name that opens the chapter is “Tashi”. Other times we have an ambiguous, half African and half Americanized voice, and the chapter’s title is “Tashi-Evelyn”. When a hybrid identity is attained, we reach “Evelyn.” It is through the lenses of these three separate but connected characters that Tashi examines her tragic experience as a victim of FGC. Tashi-Evelyn can be compared to Du Bois’ “twoness”, the idea of “two souls, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body”.<sup>34</sup>

The story begins with Olivia’s remembrances about the day she and her family arrived in the Olinka village, and how she was immediately attracted to Tashi. Olivia explains that Tashi was crying because on the morning the missionaries arrived in the village Tashi’s older and favorite sister had died as a consequence of her “circumcision”. “ Her name was Dura, and she had bled to death. That was all Tashi had been told, all she knew”.<sup>35</sup> Due to this fact Tashi develops a trauma related to blood. Once, when she gets hurt while playing with the other kids, the sight of blood sets her in panic. In the weeks preceding Dura’s genital operation there had been a merry atmosphere in Tashi’s home. Olivia describes it in details:

Suddenly she had become the center of everyone’s attention, every day there were gifts. Decorative items mainly: beads, bracelets, a bundle of dried henna for reddening hair and palms, but the odd pencil and tablet as well. Bright remnants of cloth for headscarf and dress. The promise of shoes.<sup>36</sup>

---

Available at: [http://www.iiav.nl/ezines/web/JENda/Vol1\(2001\)nr2/jendajournal/nako.html](http://www.iiav.nl/ezines/web/JENda/Vol1(2001)nr2/jendajournal/nako.html) Access: June 1<sup>st</sup>, 2005.

<sup>34</sup> (DU BOIS apud GOURDINE,1996)

<sup>35</sup> WALKER, Alice . *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. New York: Simon & Schuster,1993,p.8.

In the passage above Walker depicts with fidelity the festive part of the ceremony and tradition of FGC. In order to prepare the girls for what comes ahead, they receive many gifts as a way of encouragement.

From Olivia's words about her family's arrival in Africa, the book changes drastically to Tashi's consultation at a psychiatrist's office in the United States, many years later. Then the story moves back to Adam's memories of Tashi as a young girl, "The Tashi I remember was always laughing, and making up stories, or flitting cheerfully about the place on errands for her mother".<sup>37</sup>

In the beginning of the story there is joy in Tashi and Adam's relationship. They used to make love in the fields, which was prohibited, as the Olinkans believed that it would spoil the crop. It is relevant to mention that Adam used to perform cunnilingus on Tashi; consequently, she was able to experience clitoral orgasms prior to her genital surgery. Adam, as the son of an African-American missionary, does not seem to experience the puritan guilt about sexual intimacy before marriage, as we can perceive in his words:

She was like a fleshy, succulent fruit; and when I was not with her I dreamed of the time I would next lie on my belly between her legs, my cheeks caressed by the gentle rhythms of her thighs. My tongue bringing us no babies, and to both of us delight. This way of loving, among her people, the greatest taboo of all.<sup>38</sup>

It is easy to understand why oral sex is the greatest taboo in the Olinka society. As Olinkan women do not have clitorises, they are not able to be stimulated

---

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, p.9.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, p.14.



through cunnilingus. Thus, to talk about such thing is taboo. Tashi is an exception among African girls, who usually are not able to feel pleasure such as hers before their “circumcision”. I believe Walker gave Tashi this opportunity in order to make the change that she faces in relation to the sexual life she leads before and after the surgery more dramatic.

According to the character M'Lissa, a prized Olinkan midwife and healer, the ideal age for a girl's operation is “shortly after birth, or at the age of five or six, but certainly by the onset of puberty, ten or eleven”.<sup>39</sup> But because of Tashi's mother's conversion to Christianity through the missionaries' influence, Tashi was not required to undergo the genital surgery when she was a young girl. In addition, the fact that her sister Dura had died during the operation made her mother more convinced of the danger of the practice. Therefore, the decision to undergo the operation comes from Tashi alone, as she feels that it will join her to her sisters and make her a true woman:

The operation she'd had done to herself joined her, she felt, to these women, whom she envisioned as strong, invincible. Completely woman. Completely African. Completely Olinka. In her imagination, on her long journey to the camp, they had seemed terribly bold, terribly revolutionary and free. She saw them leaping to the attack. It was only when she at last was told by M'Lissa, who one day unbound her legs, that she might sit up and walk a few steps that she noticed her own proud walk had become a shuffle.<sup>40</sup>

As soon as Tashi's legs are unbound, she realizes the mistake she has made. Later in her adult life she asks herself: “How had I entrusted my body to this

---

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, p.28.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, p.64.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, p.64,65.

madwoman?"<sup>41</sup> This profound regret will haunt her from then on, as she will never be able to live an enjoyable, mentally and sexually healthy and fulfilled life. Instead, she becomes sexually dead and increasingly revolted. The physical and mental damages inflicted upon her by her infibulation become irreparable. Olivia's impression of Tashi, when she returns from the Mbele's camp, is very clear: "That her soul had been dealt a mortal blow was plain to anyone who dared look into her eyes".<sup>42</sup> The physical damages of the most severe form of FGC, infibulation, are explicitly described by Walker, in Olivia's words:

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 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, which no amount of scrubbing, until we got to America, ever washed off.<sup>43</sup>

According to Tina Mcelroy Ansa, Tashi does not only have 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 her ability to feel."<sup>44</sup>

Before Tashi's genital surgery, she has a heated argument with her best friend Olivia, during which she shows her reasons for keeping the tradition of FGC as a way of opposing Colonialist Imperialism. In the argument Tashi demonstrates a deep

---

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, p.151.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, p.66.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, p.65.

hatred of the colonialists' presence in the Olinka village and the missionaries' introduction of their White God and religion upon them. M'Lissa also justifies Tashi's decision of undergoing FGC as being "the only remaining definitive stamp of Olinka tradition".<sup>45</sup> Tashi says:

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. [...] You are black, but you are not like us. We look at you and your people with pity. You barely have your own black skin, and it is fading. [...] You don't even know what you've lost! And the nerve of you, to bring us a God someone else chose for you!<sup>46</sup>

Tashi's harsh words towards her best friend show that she is trying to detach herself from the missionaries' political, religious and ideological influence upon her. She has lived all her young life in Olivia's company and now she feels that if she does not break free from the Western influence and religion, she will not be able to undergo the surgery. Her final decision to undergo FGC shows her cultural self-determination and allegiance to the political cause of national liberation.

Before being "circumcised", Tashi had been stigmatized in the Olinka village. According to Efrat Tseëlon "stigma refers to a phenomenon where a person bears a mark or sign of deviance (physical, psychological or social) by departing noticeably from norms of appearance or behavior".<sup>47</sup> The feeling of not belonging to the mainstream of the Olinka society makes Tashi feel inadequate. She finds herself under ever-escalating peer pressure, and is subject of ridicule from the girls who have

---

<sup>44</sup> GATES, Henry Louis Jr. (ed.); Appiah, K.A. *Alice Walker: critical perspectives past and present*. New York: Amistad Press, Inc., 1993, p.33.

<sup>45</sup> WALKER, Alice. *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993, p.64.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, p.23.

<sup>47</sup> TSEËLON, Efrat. *The Masque of Femininity*. London: Sage Publications, 1997, p.85.

already undergone the ritual. Tashi is a teenager, and during this phase there is a great need to be accepted by one's group, as we can notice in her words:

Certainly, to all my friends who'd been circumcised, my uncircumcised vagina was thought of as 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 who had been would sometimes actually run from us, as if we were demons. Laughing, though. Always laughing.<sup>48</sup>

Tashi finds a solution to end this "jeering" by submitting herself to the knife of M'lissa. Later in her adult life she tells her psychotherapist Raye that she submitted to the operation "to be accepted as a real woman by the Olinka people, to stop the jeering".<sup>49</sup> According to Gourdine, the passage above "reveals not only the power of myth, but an individual's potential to rewrite the myths that control and define a culture".<sup>50</sup>

For the readers who do not have any previous knowledge about the issue of female genital cutting, and, more precisely, of infibulation, the description of Tashi's delivery of her baby Benny is, at least, a rare one. The readers may ask themselves: What happened to Tashi? Was her baby's head too big? Walker, at this point, depicts with crudity an extremely complicated labor caused by an infibulated vagina which results in brain damage for the baby: "The obstetrician broke two instruments trying to

---

<sup>48</sup> WALKER, Alice . *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993,p.122.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, p.122.

<sup>50</sup> GOURDINE, Angeletta K. M. Postmodern ethnography and the womanist mission: postcolonial sensibilities in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. *African American Review*, Summer 1996. Available at: <[http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m2838/is\\_n2\\_v30/ai\\_18571822/pg\\_1](http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m2838/is_n2_v30/ai_18571822/pg_1)> Access: June 8<sup>th</sup> 2005.

make an opening large enough for Benny's head. Then he used a scalpel. Then a pair of scissors used ordinarily to sever cartilage from bone".<sup>51</sup>

After Tashi's horrible ordeal was over, the doctor did not know what to do with "the hole", which became a curiosity for the American nurses, doctors and medical students, who had never seen such a thing. Eventually, Tashi was re-infibulated and this time the doctor left enough room "for pee and menstrual blood more easily to pass".<sup>52</sup> It is relevant to mention that Tashi became pregnant while still a virgin, a condition that happens with certain frequency with tightly infibulated women. Adam had tried for three months to penetrate Tashi without succeeding. Tashi's words about her baby are, shocking: "His head was yellow and blue and badly misshapen. I had no idea how to shape it properly, but hoped that once the doctor left, instinct would teach me".<sup>53</sup> Later Tashi mentions that instinctively she used her tongue in order to shape it properly.

There is a passage in the novel which stayed in my mind for a long time after I had finished reading the book. It relates to the fictionalization of the famous psychologist Carl Jung. Tashi and Adam are in Jung's house in Switzerland, and Tashi is being treated by him. Jung is showing them a black and white silent movie about his travels in Africa. The scene shows a ritual where girls are lying in a row on the floor, and the camera focuses on a large fighting cock; Tashi, on seeing this scene, faints. The next day she starts painting, on a wall, the picture of an intimidating "feathered creature" and a foot, which are small at first but become bigger and bigger. The film has brought up in Tashi her apparently dead memories of her

---

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, p.57.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, p.61.

sister's "circumcision" and following death, and of a hen, "not a cock", that would wait outside the hut in order to eat the pieces of human flesh which were thrown outside.

The scene goes:

As I painted I remembered, as if a lid lifted off my brain, the day I crept, hidden in the elephant grass, to the isolated hut from which came howls of pain and terror. Underneath a tree, on the bare ground outside the hut, lay a dozen row of little girls, though to me they seemed not so little. They were all a few years older than me. Dura's age. Dura, however, was not among them; and I knew instinctively that it was Dura being held down and tortured inside the hut. Dura who made those inhuman shrieks that rent the air and chilled my heart. Abruptly, inside, there was silence. And then I saw M'Lissa shuffle out, dragging her lame leg, and at first I didn't realize she was carrying anything, for it was so insignificant and unclean that she carried it not in her fingers but between her toes. A chicken – a hen, not a cock – was scratching futilely in the dirt between the hut and the tree where the other girls, their own ordeal over, lay. M'Lissa lifted her foot and flung this small object in the direction of the hen, and she, as if waiting for this moment, rushed toward M'Lissa's upturned foot, located the flung object in the air and then on the ground, and in one quick movement of beak and neck, gobbled it down.<sup>54</sup>

The insignificance of this piece of flesh, a "morsel" that is carried by M'Lissa's toes, is repulsive to the readers. Walker, again, uses her words in a crude and matter-of-factly way, which is her writing style; as a result, her words frequently shock and produce a kind of dizziness on her readers. The emphasis produced when the narrator states that it was a hen, not a cock, that ate Dura's flesh is metaphorical, as the emphasis on the gender of the animal denotes that, at a certain level of understanding, this is an exclusively feminine matter – since women are the ones who perform the genital surgeries, and are responsible for the perpetuation of such practices.

---

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, p.57.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, p.75.

According to George Olakunle, Carl Jung's appearance in the novel "emblemizes the novel's yearning for universal fellow-feeling. Though white and privileged, [Jung] is admitted into the progressive camp in the novel because he uses his knowledge in good ways and transcends the limitations of his cultural formation".<sup>55</sup> An example of Jung's "universal self" is found when he confides, in a letter to his niece Lisette, that Adam and Evelyn bring him "home to something in myself" or when he writes that "I am finding myself in them".<sup>56</sup>

Tashi experiences some really strange dreams in her sleep. There is a recurrent one, which is about a tower. This dream bears a strong relationship with her impaired sexuality and her fear of the phallus, as we can notice in her words: "[...] and they've broken my wings! I see them lying crossed in a corner like discarded oars. Oh, and they're forcing something in one end of me, and from the other they are busy pulling something out".<sup>57</sup> Her nightmares bring up her frustration as a woman trapped in a gigantic tower, which can be seen as a cross-cultural representation of women's entrapment in patriarchal societies.

Carl Jung's niece Lisette is Adam's French friend and lover. They first meet when Lisette goes to Olinka as a young woman, with part of a youth group from her church. First, they become very good friends, and later, lovers. They usually meet three times a year: twice Adam goes to Paris and once she goes to the United States. Lisette, through the reading of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1952), finds a sensible explanation for her world and life. She is a kind of feminist in the story, who

---

<sup>55</sup> OLAKUNLE, George. Alice Walker's Africa: Globalization and the province of fiction. Fall 2001. Available at: [http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_qa3618/is\\_2001110/ai\\_n8955377/pg\\_8](http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3618/is_2001110/ai_n8955377/pg_8)

<sup>56</sup> WALKER, Alice. *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993, p.86.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, p.27.

chooses not to marry. She gets pregnant from Adam during one of his visits and has a baby boy called Pierre.

After Carl Jung's death, Tashi continues her psychotherapy with an African-American woman named Raye, after Jung's indication. At first Tashi does not feel comfortable with the new doctor, but, little by little, she feels able to open her heart and feelings to a black woman like herself. Tashi identifies Raye as a "witch, not the warty kind American children imitate on Halloween, but a spiritual descendant of the ancient healers".<sup>58</sup> In Olakunle's words:

While the text admits Carl as an agent of positive transformation, then, Tashi's rehabilitation is ultimately attributed both to Tashi, herself, and to the 'pluckiness' of Raye, a mystical, intuitive quality that enables her to 'accompany' her black sister 'where he could not'.<sup>59</sup>

Tashi tells Raye about the Olinka leader and his teachings, which emphasize the keeping of their traditions and opposition in relation to the colonialists. This unnamed leader recalls the figure of the Kenyan leader Jomo Kenyatta (c.1890-1978). Like Kenyatta, the unnamed leader is imprisoned by White Colonial authorities and becomes a god-like figure to the Olinkans. The Olinka leader follows Kenyatta when he advocates that FGC is crucial to the keeping of their traditional way of life:

Even from prison we received our instructions, I said. Good instructions. Sensible, correct. From Our Leader. That we must remember who we were. That we must fight the white oppressors without ceasing; without, even, the contemplation of ceasing; for they would surely be around during our children's and our children's

---

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, p.134.

<sup>59</sup> OLAKUNLE, George. Alice Walker's Africa: Globalization and the province of fiction. Fall 2001. Available at: [http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_qa3618/is\\_200110/ai\\_n8955377/pg\\_8](http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3618/is_200110/ai_n8955377/pg_8)



children's time. That we must take back our land. That we must reclaim the descendants of those of our people sold into slavery throughout the world (Our Leader was particularly strong on this issue, almost alone among African leaders); that we must return to the purity of our own culture and traditions. That we must not neglect our ancient customs.<sup>60</sup>

Tashi also explains to her new psychotherapist the ways her leader encouraged the continuation of the practice of FGC in the Olinka society:

From prison Our Leader said we must keep ourselves clean and pure as we had been since time immemorial – by cutting out unclean parts of our bodies. Everyone knew 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.<sup>61</sup>

The belief that the uncut clitoris may grow and become as big as a man's phallus has been previously discussed in Chapter Two.

During a conversation between the French feminist Lizette and her already teenage son Pierre, Lizette makes a connection between the opening of an infibulated woman with a knife, which is done in some cultures by the husband just after the wedding ceremony and the horror movies, in which there is always “the man who breaks in. The man with the knife”.<sup>62</sup> This fear can be understood as being hidden in the collective unconscious of women.

As a sixteen-year-old adolescent, Pierre is exposed to some important African-American authors such as Langston Hughes, “the laughing spellbinder”, James Baldwin, “the guerrilla homosexual genius” and Richard Wright, “the tortured assimilationist and great lover of France”. According to Pierre “these men, ‘uncles’

---

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid*, p.117.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid*, p.121.

from my father's side, would be my guides on my American journey".<sup>63</sup> Alice Walker is a great admirer and propagator of African-American literature; thus, she uses her work as a way to propagate the names of other authors among her readers.

Tashi's therapist, Raye, during a conversation with Adam, mentions the fact that nine times out of ten men are unfaithful to their women when there is frigidity in the woman. And she asks, "Psychological circumcision?"<sup>64</sup> Previously in this thesis I used the words of the Egyptian doctor and feminist Nawal El Saadawi to demonstrate that Western women are victims of "psychological circumcision" due to the fact that they are encouraged not to experience clitoral orgasms due to the belief that it is immature and that women should try to concentrate and reach vaginal orgasms as being the mature kind. This pressure on women may cause a kind of stress, and, consequently, inability to reach orgasms or "psychological circumcision", as Raye suggests.

Adam and Lizette's son, Pierre, becomes an anthropologist, mainly because of Tashi's trauma and his good will to help her, but also – I would say – due to Walker's desire to write about the anthropological reasons behind FGC. The book that influences Pierre and gives him an "insight into the cultural misogyny that has victimized Tashi"<sup>65</sup> is Marcel Griaule's *Conversations with Ogotemmel* (1965).

So, said Pierre, [...], the man is circumcised to rid him of his femininity, the woman is excised to rid her of her masculinity. In other words, [...] men found it necessary to permanently lock people in the

---

<sup>62</sup> Ibid, p.139.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid, p.136.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, p.169.

<sup>65</sup> OLAKUNLE, George. Alice Walker's Africa: Globalization and the province of fiction. Fall 2001. Available at: [http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_qa3618/is\\_200110/ai\\_n8955377/pg\\_8](http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3618/is_200110/ai_n8955377/pg_8)

category of their obvious sex, even while recognizing sexual duality as a given of nature.<sup>66</sup>

Pierre also assumes that he is bisexual, and faces his bisexuality as something normal. He tells Tashi that “he likes men as well as he likes women, which seems only natural, since he is the offspring of two sexes as well as of two races. No one is surprised he is biracial, why should they be surprised he is bisexual?”<sup>67</sup> Bisexuality is one of Walker’s recurrent subjects, as shown in Shug and Celie’s relationship in the *The Color Purple*. Today, Walker considers herself bisexual and writes naturally about that. She is also the offspring of two sexes as well as of two, or even three races, as she believes to have White, Black and Native American blood.

On the same page, Walker writes about the Chinese foot binding of women and compares that to FGC. In the case of FGC the woman is sexually immobilized and in relation to the Chinese foot binding the woman is physically immobilized: “[...] the rotten smell was an aphrodisiac for the man, who liked to hold both small feet helpless in his large hand, raising them to his nose as he prepared to ravish the woman, who could not run away”.<sup>68</sup>

Walker demonstrates the widespread feminist view on the subject of FGC, in which there is a belief in the jealousy of men in relation to women’s sexual autonomy, and, consequently, pleasure, by using Pierre’s character and words as a student of anthropology:

Man is jealous of woman’s pleasure, Pierre says after a while, because she does not require him to achieve it. When her outer sex is

---

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, p.176.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid, p.174.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid, p.176.

cut off, and she is left only the smallest, inelastic opening through which to receive pleasure, he can believe it is only his penis that can reach her inner parts and give her what she craves. But it is only his lust for her conquest that makes the effort worthwhile. And then it is literally a battle, with blood flowing on both sides.<sup>69</sup>

Walker wants to cover every aspect and geographic occurrence of FGC. As a result, she also touches the subject of FGC in the United States. There is a character, Amy, who appears only briefly in the novel, just to tell her story. When she was a small child, Amy used to touch herself in her genitals. Her mother tried to make her stop, without success. Eventually, a doctor was asked to cut Amy's clitoris off. The occurrence of FGC in the Western world was also briefly discussed in Chapter Two.

During a conversation between Tashi and her circumciser M'lissa, which takes place in Africa, as Tashi goes back to Olinka in order to revenge herself on the old circumciser, M'lissa mentions the fact that men like "fighting" in order to enter a woman. Another aspect of FGC brought up by M'lissa is the fact that women may feel pleasure even after being severely infibulated:

The bitches are used to it, she says. And it is true, you know, the men like it tight. Fighting. Don't think the women never receive pleasure, either, says M'Lissa. I never have, I say. That is your own fault, she says. The pleasure a woman receives comes from her own brain. The brain sends it to any spot a lover can touch.<sup>70</sup>

Another extremely important issue that was dealt in Chapter Two is brought up by M'lissa when she mentions that boys practice anal sex prior to their marriages. In this thesis, this issue was brought up by my belief that anal sex among African men is

---

<sup>69</sup> Ibid, p.182.

one of the causes for the spread of the AIDS epidemic in Africa. In M'lissa's words: "That is how boys do it to each other while waiting for the girl's dowry to be raised. Dowry raising takes such a long time, what can you expect them to do?"<sup>71</sup>

Alice Walker deals with urgent and current issues in this novel and Tina Mcelroy Ansa makes a masterly analysis of this urgency:

There is a tendency for the reader to place this action, this genital mutilation, in a former time, in another century, to put some space between "us" in our safe world and "them", who would do this to a child, a human being. But Walker won't allow it. Characters read Newsweek; a floor of the Olinkan prison has been turned over to AIDS patients. This is going on right now, Walker keeps reminding the reader, and this is what it is like. Walker's novel with its wounded main character struggling for a healing and understanding of what has been done to her pulls the covers off a practice as old as the pyramids and as current as the AIDS epidemic.<sup>72</sup>

Walker shows her concern about the conditions in which the genital operations are performed with extreme fidelity, and she also writes about the connection between the AIDS epidemic in Africa and the practice of FGC. This subject can be found in the novel:

Tashi is convinced that the little girls who are dying, and the women too, are 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 their instrument. There is also the fact that almost every act of intercourse involves tearing and bleeding, especially in a woman's early years. The opening that is made will never enlarge on its own, but must always be forced. Because of this, infections and open sores are commonplace.<sup>73</sup>

---

<sup>70</sup> Ibid,p.246.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid, p.246.

<sup>72</sup> GATES, Henry Louis Jr. (ed.); Appiah, K.A. *Alice Walker* : critical perspectives past and present. New York: Amistad Press, Inc., 1993, p.33.

<sup>73</sup> WALKER, Alice . *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993,p.251,252.

Towards the end of the story Tashi explains how she killed her circumciser M'lissa: "I placed a pillow over her face and lay across it for an hour. Her sad stories about her life caused me to lose my taste for slashing her".<sup>74</sup> Olakunle compares the old woman M'Lissa to an archetypal Scheherazade who,

for days stays her murderer's hand by telling stories. The text's recourse to the Scheherazade motif thus establishes a commonality of experience and identity between M'Lissa and Tashi. And since both women are inventions in the service of Walker's story-telling, the latter herself becomes the original Scheherazade.<sup>75</sup>

When M'Lissa's and Tashi's experiences of excision converge, both women's voices "become fluid and indistinguishable as each confronts her pain".<sup>76</sup> M'Lissa uses the third person when she talks about her excision: "She is still crying. She's been crying since I left. No wonder I haven't been able to. She has been crying all our tears."<sup>77</sup> M'Lissa's use of the third person makes her voice a universal voice, the voice of every single woman subjected to the practice of FGC.

Walker has been accused by some critics of Cultural Imperialism, as they believe that her depiction of Africa and Africans in the novel "is beholden to her Western hegemonic heritage as an American rather than the African self she claims in the novel".<sup>78</sup> This accusation is related to her claim of two different and exclusive

---

<sup>74</sup> Ibid, p.276.

<sup>75</sup> OLAKUNLE, George. Alice Walker's Africa: Globalization and the province of fiction. Fall 2001. Available at: [http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_qa3618/is\\_200110/ai\\_n8955377/pg\\_8](http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3618/is_200110/ai_n8955377/pg_8)

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> WALKER, Alice . *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993,p.225.

<sup>78</sup> NONTASASA, Nako. Possessing the Voice of the Other: African Women and the "Crisis of Representation" in Alice Walker's *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. *Jenda: A Journal of Culture and African Women Studies*.2001. Available at: [http://www.iiav.nl/eazines/web/JENda/Vol1\(2001\)nr2/jendajournal/nako.html](http://www.iiav.nl/eazines/web/JENda/Vol1(2001)nr2/jendajournal/nako.html) Access: June 1<sup>st</sup>, 2005.

positions: that of “being possessed of the other’s voice,” as an African descendant herself, and that of “attempting to enable the other to talk”.<sup>79</sup>

According to Nako Nontsasa, Walker displaces her Imperialist reading onto another text by Mirellia Ricciardi, identified by Tashi as “a white colonialist author who has lived all her life among Africans and failed to see them as human beings who can be destroyed by suffering”.<sup>80</sup> This appropriation of Ricciardi’s text is “used to authorize Walker’s speech, to locate her firmly on the side of the colonized”, Nontsasa argues. The passage used by Walker is from Ricciardi’s book *African Saga*, published in 1982.

Tashi disagrees with what is written at the beginning of the novel, that Black people possess the secret of joy and the justification that this is “why they can survive the suffering and humiliation inflicted upon them”.<sup>81</sup> Tashi feels enraged by this passage from Ricciardi’s book as she reads it as a colonialist and racist view of Africans. Walker, through Tashi, demonstrates her rage by using extremely harsh words:

Why don't they just steal our land, mine our gold, chop down our forests, pollute our rivers, enslave us to work on their farms, fuck us, devour our flesh and leave us alone? Why must they also write about how much joy we possess?<sup>82</sup>

At the very end of the novel, just before Tashi is executed by the firing squad, she writes to Lisette, who is already dead, and tells her that “I will face the firing

---

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> WALKER, Alice. *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993,p.271.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid, p.272.

squad for killing someone who, many years ago, killed me.”<sup>83</sup> Before Tashi is shot, her friends and family unfurl a banner in which is written, in capital letters, what the real secret of joy for Tashi and her creator Alice Walker is: “RESISTANCE IS THE SECRET OF JOY”!<sup>84</sup> In a global aspect, this resistance can be related to the African peoples and their descendants’ survival after being sold into slavery and forced to work under inhumane conditions, resisting all sorts of humiliation up to our days. Resistance can also be related to the endurance of the practice of FGC, a practice that is up to six thousands years old now, as the Africans’ attitude toward their culture do not allow interference from the Western world in relation to their traditions, FGC included. On an individual level, the word resistance can be related to the African woman’s strength that enables her to overcome physical and psychological traumas and find “joy” in life in spite of all.

At the end of her life, Tashi concludes that “I am beginning to reinhabit completely the body I long ago left”.<sup>85</sup> Tashi dies joyfully, figured by a metaphor of flight: “There is a roar as if the world cracked open and I flew inside. I am no more. And satisfied”.<sup>86</sup> Her death represents a kind of emancipation and final reunion with her own self.

In order to conclude this chapter and section, I will use Gourdine’s words about Walker’s most controversial novel:

Reading *Possessing* then becomes a journey into the political, social, and gendered consciousness of Alice Walker. *Possessing the Secret of Joy* is about Alice Walker and her

---

<sup>83</sup> Ibid, p.274.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid, p.281.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid, p.110.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.



politics more than, or at least equally as much as, it is about Tashi and her trauma.<sup>87</sup>

To continue resisting the tradition of female genital cutting, Walker has set aside a part of the book's royalties to "educate women and girls, men and boys, about the hazardous effects of genital mutilation, not simply on the health and happiness of individuals, but on the whole society in which it is practiced, and the world".<sup>88</sup>



---

<sup>87</sup> GOURDINE, Angeletta K. M. Postmodern ethnography and the womanist mission: postcolonial sensibilities in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. ***African American Review***, Summer 1996. Available at: <[http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m2838/is\\_n2\\_v30/ai\\_18571822/pg\\_1](http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m2838/is_n2_v30/ai_18571822/pg_1)> Access: June 8<sup>th</sup> 2005.

<sup>88</sup> WALKER, Alice. ***Possessing the Secret of Joy***. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993,p.285.

## CONCLUSION

It is a fact that Alice Walker became world famous due to her Pulitzer Prize winning novel *The Color Purple* (1982) and its following Steven Spielberg movie version. But it is also a fact that Walker became internationally recognized for her work as a social and political activist through her novel *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992) and her subsequent works *Warrior Marks*, the film and the documentary book.

In the *Annual Review of Anthropology* 2004 Alice Walker's name was mentioned and her work recognized: "Alice Walker's celebrated book, *Possessing the Secret of Joy* and her more recent film and literary collaboration *Warrior Marks* significantly raised public awareness of female circumcision".<sup>1</sup> Even though Alice Walker is not an anthropologist and has little anthropological knowledge, her work has been mentioned in a very important document as having successfully opposed female circumcision by reaching a significantly public awareness about the subject. This recognition can be viewed as a great conquest for Walker, who saw her work being used as a tool in the combat against FGC.

Literature is Walker's life and work, and it is through her books that she is able to reach her goals as a writer, feminist and social activist. For Walker literature is not

just a way of entertaining her readers, it is not as much “*dulce*” as it is “*utile*”. A piece of writing by Walker is always enveloped in political awareness. Sometimes it can be subtle, but it is always there, somewhere. Nothing that comes out of her mind and hands is just “for art’s sake”.

Barbara Kramer, in her book entitled *Alice Walker* (1995) has stated that “all the media attention on female circumcision has proved that Walker did what she wanted to do – made people think. It is what she tries to do with all her writing”.<sup>2</sup> What Walker does with her writing is also done by most minority writers (African-American women writers). They use their talent and work to write about issues that otherwise would not be given attention by the still white male dominant society. These black women writers usually write about their own life experiences facing racism, oppression, sexual abuse, poverty, and finally, success. They are women that make people think, just like Walker does.

Barbara Kramer also wrote that Walker forces her readers “to look at problems they might not have to deal with otherwise”.<sup>3</sup> I believe Walker reaches her goal as a writer and social critic when she “forces” her readers to read about an issue that otherwise they would never meet or desire to face, such as FGC. According to Kramer, Walker has attracted a lot of attention from the media due to the fact that *Possessing the Secret of Joy* deals with the issue of female genital cutting, usually a taboo subject in life, fiction and literature.

---

<sup>1</sup> ANTHROPOLOGY and Circumcision. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, Palo Alto, Calif., US, n.33,p.419-45,2004.

<sup>2</sup> KRAMER, Barbara. *Alice Walker*. New Jersey: Enslow Publishers, Inc., 1995, p.110.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

Angeletta Gourdine wrote about the fact that *Possessing the Secret of Joy* is more than a novel, it is a text that “exists somewhere on the boundaries of cultural criticism (a reading) and fiction (a reading)”.<sup>4</sup> It truly is a difficult book to classify as just a novel, as there is so much social engagement in it. The author’s perception of Reality is presented in the form of Fiction, and the use of fiction becomes a tool to write and explain to her readers what, for her, lies behind female genital surgeries and their consequences in the world. According to Olakunle, “Walker shows that for her, the work of fiction is not an escape from the world, but an intense self-immersion in that world”.<sup>5</sup> The world we live in, with all its problems, is Walker’s main “ingredient” to be used in her writings.

Alice Walker is one of the most controversial African American writers of all times. Surely she is not the only author who writes about social injustice and women’s oppression by men, but her difference from most writers is that she writes about every single and important issue in the world: what happens to black women in America or in Africa, the outrages committed against our planet in terms of history and environmental issues, the importance of keeping one’s heritage and roots, everything is included in her work. It seems that as long as there is injustice in the world, Walker, like a paladin, will continue to fight against it. Alice Walker is a warrior and the blade of her words cut as sharply as a butcher’s knife.

---

<sup>4</sup> GOURDINE, Angeletta K. M. Postmodern ethnography and the womanist mission: postcolonial sensibilities in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. ***African American Review***, Summer 1996. Available at: <[http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m2838/is\\_n2\\_v30/ai\\_18571822/pg\\_1](http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m2838/is_n2_v30/ai_18571822/pg_1)> Access: June 8<sup>th</sup> 2005.

<sup>5</sup> OLAKUNLE, George. Alice Walker’s Africa: Globalization and the province of fiction. Fall 2001. Available t:<[http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_qa3618/is\\_200110/ai\\_n8955377/pg\\_8](http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3618/is_200110/ai_n8955377/pg_8)> Access: June 2<sup>nd</sup>,2005.

Walker's creation and development of Tashi and her saga has been a process of rediscovery of her own self as a "mutilated" black woman. Walker found a way for Tashi's final liberation through death. Walker's own liberation, however, can only be reached through her writing universe. There she feels free to deal with any conceivable subject that she sets her mind to, such as female genital cutting, a taboo subject. Tashi, as an African woman born in Olinka, faces FGC as an adolescent in *The Color Purple*. In *The temple of My Familiar* her name is only briefly mentioned, just to show that she is still there, somewhere in Walker's mind, waiting to be allowed to move. In *Possessing the Secret of Joy* Tashi becomes a mother and a grown woman, who struggles to overcome her initial trauma and finds her own self at the end. *Possessing the Secret of Joy* is not Walker's most prized book, but, for me, it is the book that most makes people think about and feel the pain of these women who have no choices in their lives but to face the knife of "M'Lissa".

Walker has reached her goal, as a writer committed to a cause. As far as her cause is concerned, she managed to widen up the dimension of the discussion to a worldwide sphere. She has managed to move her readers towards getting a position regarding this delicate affair. As a writer, Walker created a complex, mysterious, multicultural character in an awe-inspiring novel, and subverted some of the current notions of what a piece of literature must be, by blurring the boundaries between Art and Life in a disconcerting way.

This thesis might have gone a little too far in the direction of anthropology or social studies, but I am willing to take the consequences as a tribute to Alice Walker, who preceded me in walking deeply into those areas. Actually, the thesis of my

thesis is that Alice Walker always does what her instinct tells her to do in her writings, and succeeds, because she is in tune with her time, with her world, and with her audience.

Female genital cutting might be still a taboo subject, but surely Walker has succeeded in her attempt to make it known and discussed in academic and intellectual circles all over the world. In addition, I believe Walker is quite pleased with the response to her novel *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. Although the author has been criticized by some feminists, anthropologists, and literary critics, she has accepted their criticism as she has accepted the appreciation, and also, the criticism, made about her previous and also controversial works such as *The Color Purple* and *The Temple of My Familiar*. When a writer writes about “dangerous” subjects and marches into “forbidden” territories, she is prepared to face harsh criticisms, and pay the price for her moves.

As a writer and a feminist, I believe Walker has proved to be very successful: as a writer, she has received widespread attention towards her books *Possessing the Secret of Joy* and *Warrior Marks*, which deal exclusively with the issue of FGC. And as a feminist, she has written about a patriarchal culture and tradition in which the whole society is organized in favor of the interests of men (the Olinka society). As a result, Walker writes about these power imbalances due to gender in the Olinka culture and society and challenges them through the use of her literary text.

At the end of *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, in a note to the reader, Walker mentions that she is going to use a portion of the royalties “to educate women and

girls, men and boys, about the hazardous effects of genital mutilation...”<sup>6</sup> As it was written several times throughout this thesis: education is everything in the war against FGC.

Walker has been concerned with the lives of Black women since the beginning of her career; thus, she feels that her mission is, among many things, the saving of these oppressed lives. As Walker once wrote, “It is, in the end, the saving of lives that we writers are about. Whether we are ‘minority’ writers or ‘majority’. It is simply in our power to do this.”<sup>7</sup> In relation to *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, Walker uses this tremendous power that she believes writers do have in order to help save the future sexual lives of millions of girls who are submitted to the practice of female genital cutting every year and to put an end on this “sexual blinding” of women.



---

<sup>6</sup> WALKER, Alice . *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993, p.285.

<sup>7</sup> WALKER, Alice . *In Search of our Mothers' Gardens*. New York: Hartcourt Brace & Company, 1983, p.14.

## EPILOGUE

*We fell asleep in our quiet hotel room overlooking a canal, exhausted but content. I felt especially fulfilled, I knew this was the last journey I had to make before beginning to write Possessing the Secret of Joy, a story whose subject frankly frightened me. An unpopular story. Even a taboo one. An ancient story. A modern story. A story in which I would call on Jung's spirit to help me confront one of the most physically and psychologically destructive practices of our time (and of thousands of years before our time), a practice that undermines the collective health and wholeness of great numbers of people in Africa, the Middle East, and the far East and is rapidly finding a toehold in the Western world: the genital mutilation of women and girls.*

**Alice Walker**, *Anything we Love can be saved*



## BIBLIOGRAPHY



ANTHROPOLOGY and Circumcision. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, Palo Alto, Calif., US, n.33, p.419-45, 2004.

BENHABIB, Sheila; CORNELL, Drucilla. *Feminismo Como Crítica da Modernidade*. Traduzido por Nathanael da Costa Caixeiro. Rio de Janeiro: Rosa dos Tempos, 1987. Tradução de *Feminism as Critique*.

BOEHMER, Elleke. *Colonial & Postcolonial Literature*. London: Oxford University Press, s.d.

BOYLE, Elizabeth H.; PREVES, Sharon E. National Politics as International Process: The Case of Anti-Female-Genital-Cutting Laws. *Law & Society Review*, Beverly Hills, Calif., USA, v.34, n.3, p.703-37, 2000.

BROWN, Dan. *The Da Vinci Code*. Sydney: Bantam Press, 2003.

CHRISTIAN, Barbara T. (ed). *Everyday Use*. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1994.

DIRIE, Waris; MILLER, Cathleen. *Desert Flower*. London: Virago Press, 1999.

EAGLETON, Mary (ed.). *Feminist Literary Theory – A Reader*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987.

FOX, Chris (ed.) et al. *LONGMAN Dictionary of Contemporary English*. 3 ed. Barcelona: Cayfosa, 1995.

FOX, Diana J. Women's Struggles for Equality, Power and Voice in Africa and the Middle East. *Journal of Third World Studies*, Americus, Georgia, US, v.19, n.2, p. 347-53, fall 2002.

FRENCH, Marilyn. *A Guerra contra as Mulheres*. Traduzido por Maria T.M. Cavallari. São Paulo: Best Seller, 1992. Tradução de : *The War Against Women*.

GATES, Henry Louis Jr. (ed.); Appiah, K.A. *Alice Walker : Critical Perspectives Past and Present*. New York: Amistad Press, Inc., 1993.

GOURDINE, Angeletta K. M. Postmodern Ethnography and the Womanist Mission: Postcolonial Sensibilities in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. *African American Review*, Summer 1996. Available at: [http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m2838/is\\_n2\\_v30/ai\\_18571822/pg\\_1](http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m2838/is_n2_v30/ai_18571822/pg_1) Access: June 8<sup>th</sup> 2005.

GRUENBAUM, Ellen. *The Female Circumcision Controversy: An Anthropological Perspective*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001.

HARTSOCK, Nancy C.M. *Money Sex and Power: Toward a Feminist Historical Materialism*. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1985.

JOHANSEN, Elise B. Pain as a Counterpoint to Culture: Toward an Analysis of Pain Associated with Infibulation among Somali Immigrants in Norway. *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*, Arlington, VA, US, v.16, n.3, p.312-40, S 2002.

JONES, Wanda K. et al. Who is at Risk in the U.S.? *Public Health Reports*, Washington, US, v.112, p.368-77, S/O' 97.

KRAMER, Barbara. *Alice Walker*. New Jersey: Enslow Publishers, Inc., 1995.

LANE, Sandra D.; RUBINSTEIN, Robert A.. Judging the Other Responding to Traditional Female Genital Surgeries. *The Hastings Center Report*, New York, US, v.26, p.31-40, My/Je 1996'.

LARSEN, Ulla; YAN, Sharon. Does Female Circumcision Affect Infertility and Fertility? A study of the Central African Republic, Côte D'Ivoire, and Tanzania. *Demography*, Chicago, US, v.37, n.3, p.313-21, Ag.2000.

LIGHTFOOT-KLEIN, Hanny. *Prisoners of Ritual: An Odyssey into Female Genital Circumcision in Africa*. New York / London: Harrington Park Press, 1989.

NARRATING Feminism: The Woman Question in the Thinking of an African Radical. *Differences*, Durham, North Carolina, US, v.15, n.2, p.152-71, Summer 2004.

NEWELL, Katherine S. et al. *Discrimination Against the Girl Child*. Washington: Master Print, Inc., 2000.

NICHOLSON, Linda J. (ed). *Feminism / Postmodernism*. New York / London: Routledge, 1990.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Gender and History: The Limits of Social Theory in the Age of the Family*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1986.

NONTSASA, Nako. Possessing the Voice of the Other: African Women and the "Crisis of Representation" in Alice Walker's *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. *Jenda: A Journal of Culture and African Women Studies*. 2001. Available at: [http://www.iiav.nl/ezines/web/JENda/Vol1\(2001\)nr2/jendajournal/nako.html](http://www.iiav.nl/ezines/web/JENda/Vol1(2001)nr2/jendajournal/nako.html) Access: June 1<sup>st</sup>, 2005.

- O'BRIAN, John. *Interviews with Black Writers*. New York, Liveright, 1973.
- OLAKUNLE, George. Alice Walker's Africa: Globalization and the Province of Fiction. Fall 2001. Available at:  
<[http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_qa3618/is\\_200110/ai\\_n8955377/pg\\_8](http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3618/is_200110/ai_n8955377/pg_8)> Access: June 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2005.
- RUSSELL-ROBINSON, Joyce. African Female Circumcision and the Missionary Mentality. *Issue: A Journal of Opinion* (ASA), New Brunswick, NJ, US, v.26, n.1, p.56, 1997.
- SAADAWI, Nawal El. *The Hidden Face of Eve: Women in the Arab World*. Traduzido e editado por Dr. Sherif Hetata. London: Zed Books Ltd., 1993.
- SAID, Edward. *Orientalismo*. Traduzido por Tomás Rosa Bueno. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2001. Tradução de *Orientalism*.
- SYMBOLIC Gender Politics, Religious Group Identity, and the Decline in Female Genital Cutting in Minya, Egypt. *Social Forces*, Chapel Hill, US, v.82, n.3, p.1063-90, Mr.2004.
- THE Health Consequences of Female Circumcision: Science, Advocacy, and Standards of Evidence. *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*, Arlington, VA, US, v.17, n.3, p.394-412, S.2003.
- TSEËLON, Efrat. *The Masque of Femininity*. London: Sage Publications, 1997.
- WALKER, Alice. *Anything We Love Can be Saved*. New York: The Ballantine Publishing Group, 1997.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Horses Make a Landscape Look More Beautiful*. New York: A Harvest Book, Harcourt Brace & Company, 1986.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *In Search of our Mothers' Gardens*. New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1983.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Living by the Word*. New York: A Harvest Book, Harcourt Brace & Company, 1988.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Meridian*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1976.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Ninguém Segura Essa Mulher*. Traduzido por Betulia Machado e Maria José Silveira. São Paulo: Marco Zero Ltda, 1987. Tradução de *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down*.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Once*. New York: A Harvest Book, Harcourt Brace & Company, 1968.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993.

\_\_\_\_\_ . *The Color Purple*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1985.

\_\_\_\_\_ . *The Temple of My Familiar*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1990.

\_\_\_\_\_ . *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988.

\_\_\_\_\_ ; PARMAR, Pratibha. *Warrior Marks: Female Genital Mutilation and the Sexual Blinding of Women*. New York: A Harvest Book, Harcourt Brace & Company, 1996.

