



Female Genital Mutilation as a Cultural Practice Controlling Women's Sexuality: A Study of Alice Walker's *Possessing the Secret of Joy*

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Abstract— Communities frequently hold on to their traditional and cultural traditions for centuries. Some habits are good for everyone, but others are bad for some groups, including women. One such practice that serves to suppress women's sexuality and maintain patriarchal power is female genital mutilation (FGM). Societal standards that uphold gender-based violence and place a premium on male gratification give rise to this behavior. Cultural justifications for female genital mutilation (FGM) abound, but at its core, FGM is a patriarchal society's attempt to maintain control over women's bodies and sexuality—a practice that has broader implications for gender power politics and reinforces male domination. Some African American women authors rise to the forefront, bringing Black women's attention to the truths of their traditions and helping them realize their own self-worth and identity via literature. Black women's emancipation is made possible by these authors' drawing attention to issues confronting their community. Alice Walker is a well-known author and activist who has used her platform to fight for the equality and freedom of oppressed women. The horrific practice of female genital mutilation is examined in Alice Walker's *Possessing the Secret of Joy* in this article. The author demonstrates the anguish that African women endure as a result of engaging in ritual mutilation for the enjoyment of males in the name of tradition. Walker highlights the need of challenging and abandoning such practices in the name of tradition and culture via the character of Tashi, who undergoes female genital mutilation. Through an analysis of Alice Walker's *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, this article seeks to delve into the pain that African women have suffered for the sake of cultural preservation.



Keywords— Female Genital Mutilation, Controlling Agents, Female Sexuality, Trauma

I. INTRODUCTION

What some cultures see as the ultimate symbol of beauty and womanhood is the painful cultural practice and treatment known as "Female Genital Mutilation," or FGM. As a last necessary step, it confers religious and marital sanctity on females and forces them into the role of womanhood. From the moment of birth until adolescence, female genital mutilation (FGM) often takes place. Each nation and ethnic group has its own unique set of protocols. Countless nations around the globe observe it as a sacred rite to protect the sanctity of the female reproductive organ.

The practice includes the non-medical removal of female genitalia as part of a ceremony.

Infibulation is the most severe of three main forms of female genital mutilation, the others being sunna and clitoridectomy. Sunna involves slicing the clitoris, and clitoridectomy, sometimes called excision, involves completely removing it. The infibulation procedure involves the removal of the vaginal lips, narrowing of the vagina rather than expanding it, and the substitution of tiny holes for the usual vaginal and urine passages. In her incisive analysis of female genital mutilation (FGM), Alice Walker illuminates the devastating

impact of this practice on the lives of African women in her book *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. The cultural importance of female genital mutilation (FGM) and its function in limiting women's sexuality are examined in this article via the prism of Walker's book.

II. THE CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF FGM

Immigrant communities in the US, Canada, Europe, and Australia continue a practice that has persisted for 6,000 years, beginning with the ancient Egyptians. The practice is also practiced in twenty-eight African nations and parts of Asia. Individual cultural practitioners make sure the practice is carried on in its new home country even if it is illegal in so-called more "civilized" nations. Eighty million women in Africa and between eighty-five and eleven million women globally have the operation done annually, according to the World Health Organization.

As a method of controlling women's bodies and maintaining female purity, FGM is often rationalized. Girls are traditionally prepared for femininity, marriage, and motherhood by female genital mutilation (FGM) in many cultures. "[Infibulation] is the most powerful manifestation of the phallocratic system's control over female sexuality," and "its only purpose is to discourage girls from engaging in sexual relations prior to marriage" (Thiam 60, 72).

One way in which the patriarchal society seeks to restrict and suppress women's sexuality is via the practice of female genital mutilation. "European and American doctors used clitoridectomy as a cure for masturbation and so-called nymphomania" (407), according to Walley. An argument that "curbs the potentially excessive sexuality of females" is made by Joyce Russel-Robinson (55). Women in communities where polygamy is practiced are expected to be infibulated and relegated to the lowest social and human status imaginable. According to Bell (130), the World Health Organization acknowledges that these mutilations destroy women's libido. Gender power politics include the justifications for female genital mutilation, which include preserving the virginity of the female body, reining in a woman's supposedly excessive libido, respecting religious teachings, and, most importantly, ensuring male dominance over women.

In the places where female genital mutilation is practiced, it is important to note that traditionally, in both Eastern and Western human sexuality, heterosexual intercourse has primarily aimed at the gratification of the man. The only goal of African women is to satisfy their husbands, hence in nations where female genital mutilation is practiced, a woman's sexual pleasure is neither considered before nor after the surgery. They care only about their husband's enjoyment during intercourse, and they believe that a

woman's ability to offer him pleasure depends on how tightly she is sewed. Many women who experienced female genital mutilation see sexual activity to be an affliction; they engage in it just to satisfy their spouses and produce children.

Young girls are often the targets of female genital mutilation (FGM) because they are easier to control and so suffer less harm to their genitalia. And since they have no idea what's going to happen to them, the kids don't fight back either. Some people think that because a younger girl won't remember much about the procedure, it won't be as emotionally taxing on her. But Alice Walker is not on board with this idea; she thinks the operation causes a great deal of mental distress. The traditional belief is that female genital mutilation (FGM) makes women more feminine by decreasing their libido and making the vagina more narrow, which in turn makes men more satisfied sexually. That is to say, women are socialized to get pleasure from men's clitoris-related sex pleasure even if clitoris removal eliminates any possibility of physical sex pleasure for women.

It is also thought that the clitoris causes ejaculation and early resolution in males, or at least that it gives women cravings that men can't always fulfill. In many patriarchal civilizations, it is believed to be the source of domestic strife in both cases. This tension may be avoided if the man maintains dominance in the bedroom. In essence, removing the clitoris serves to stop a guy from ejaculating too early, allows him to have sexual relations in whatever way he wants (because the woman doesn't feel any desire or pleasure), and keeps domestic strife to a minimum. What this means is that women undergo or are coerced into FGM in order to improve men's sexual performance and avoid potential complications, even if it means sacrificing their own feeling of pleasure.

All of the aforementioned details are critical for grasping the many facets of this contentious procedure. Through the dramatized life narrative of Tashi, Walker's *Possessing the Secret of Joy* provides readers with important data on infibulation, an ancient ritualized activity. The story delves into the massive fallout of this practice, illuminating the female victims' deceit and exploitation, their bodily pain and psychological shackling, health decline, and libido ruined.

III. FGM IN POSSESSING THE SECRET OF JOY

There is no denying that female circumcision violates women's human rights and individuality. Walker's political stance is evident throughout the novel, and she is adamant that female circumcision, which involves cutting off the

clitoris, is a kind of mutilation. She insists that it is inconceivable to have such a practice at the end of the 20th century, even when there are arguments about preserving national and ethnic identity. Walker puts the rights of women and girls ahead of everything else, even when doing so puts her at danger of neocolonialism accusations. Gender is given more weight than culture in Walker's story. A young African lady named Tashi suffers through female genital mutilation (FGM) in Walker's book. Walker highlights the mental and physical suffering that women undergo as a result of female genital mutilation (FGM) via Tashi's story. The story shows female genital mutilation (FGM) as a way for patriarchal cultures to keep men in charge and keep the gender power gap wide open. As a witness to the severe repercussions of FGM, Tashi's issues with her identity, selfhood, and physical autonomy are evident.

The patriarchal culture of the Olinka subjugated the minds of all its members and turned the elders into complicit participants in the subjection and mutilation of African women by convincing them that a "uncircumcised vagina" was "a monstrosity" (Walker 121). Peer pressure and general ignorance made life much more difficult for uncircumcised women. All of Tashi's friends "jeered" at her and considered her "odd," as she says in her memoir (Walker 121). Tashi decides to undergo circumcision in order to be acknowledged as "a real woman by the Olinka people" rather than just "a thing," to put an end to their mockery of her, and to demonstrate that she is not betraying her culture or disrespecting Olinka tradition. Because the Olinka never broach the subject of circumcision—a traditional taboo—and Tashi's lack of knowledge about the topic, Walker reveals that she gives in to cultural pressure. She has the naïveté to think that becoming circumcised would make her "Completely woman. Authentically from Africa. Wholly Olinka, according to Walker (64). Even if the chiefs insist on it, Tashi tells the readers, circumcision is never broached. Dura, Tashi's beloved sister, "had bled to death" (Walker 8), but Tashi was obligated to keep her emotions in check and refrain from mentioning her when she was a tiny kid. While Dura was being tortured inside a hut, Tashi, who had been hidden in the grass, could hear her sister's "howls of pain and terror" (Walker 75). However, she was too young to intervene and was compelled to keep quiet about Dura's murder for a long time.

Walker aims to help readers accept that this brutal African initiation process is "not fiction but cultural hermeneutics" (Russell-Robinson 54) by depicting an African woman's physical, mental, and spiritual experiences with female genital mutilation. According to Russell-Robinson, the practice of clitoris or whole female genital genital mutilation removal is "a symptom of mere tradition,

conformity and cultural maladjustment" (54). As a result of patriarchal norms and the needs of males, African women are molded by men.

African women are subject to patriarchal tribal culture's control over their lives and bodies, as Walker mentions in a discussion between Tashi and M'Lissa. The boys are expected to "break into the woman's body" according to their gender role. Many times, they injure themselves while attempting (Walker 245). Socialization teaches boys that males should "like it tight" (Walker 245), even while they are unaware of the treatment of women. African females acquire this similar lesson; they would actively seek out a tsunga's services to be sewed tighter even after they become brides and mothers. There are ladies out there who have hired tsungas to make theirs even tighter than that, M'Lissa tells Tashi. They do it after the birth of every kid. This has happened to them more than once, twice, or even three times. According to Walker, "each time tighter than before" (245). For some African women, the need to show to males that they are beautiful, submissive ladies is so strong that they are prepared to mutilate their bodies and undergo painful treatments to achieve this goal. Rather than improving women's lives, this research contends that female genital mutilation (FGM), particularly clitoridectomy and infibulation, causes them tremendous suffering. Since male circumcision involves the removal of an undesirable portion of skin from the body, it contends that FGM cannot be compared to this procedure since it does not have any detrimental effects on a man's body.

As a result of her patriotism, Tashi travels to the United States after having infibulation done on her when she was a young lady. Without a clue about what lies next, Tashi proudly endures infibulation as a young lady. Women who have undergone female circumcision are highly esteemed and respected in Walker's African microcosm, Olinka, Tashi's homeland. Since female circumcision is considered the most vital attribute of femininity by patriarchy, the hardships endured by women as a result of patriarchal authority are either ignored or downplayed. The story of Tashi's life exemplifies how patriarchal societies' mothers readily have their daughters circumcised without discussing the procedure's consequences or the risk of death. Because patriarchal traditions are so deeply ingrained in our culture, mothers often feel pressured to pass on their suffering to their daughters at the expense of their own health and happiness. In this culture, it is taboo for women to talk about their struggles, and just as their mothers did, they pass their suffering on to their daughters. Throughout the book, Walker portrays the act of passing on one's suffering and embracing it as a symbol of womanhood as a noble and honorable one.

After experiencing her sexuality with her lover-husband Adam as a child, Tashi gets the operation as an adult, and the experience brings morbidity to her life and sexuality. The chasm that opened up in her eyes following the procedure's side effect is a metaphor for the emotional, mental, and personal decline she's experienced throughout her life. Tashi knows now that her decision to have the operation was completely wrong and that the pain associated with it is the worst kept dark secret of patriarchy and its enforcers after she has had irregular periods for over two weeks, urinated for over twenty-five minutes each session, and had an abnormal delivery that damages her child's brain. She struggles with the recurring psychological trauma she endures throughout her life and regrets her own choice, undergoing psychotherapy for decades. This study presents the argument that the outcome of female genital mutilation is kept a secret in culture by manipulating women emotionally and mentally into undergoing the surgery. Though the procedure's chaos may seem to be a minor cultural problem to some, the aftermath—which causes males to surpass many women and seize power in a society—is never seen as the most negative part of gender politics, despite being the most crucial factor that determines success or failure. Adam and Tashi have a broken baby, but they can't go back to the carefree love they once had. Every day, she feels trapped by the weight of regret over bearing a unique kid, but she knows she can't change the past. A new horror unfolds every day for her kid. She has physical, mental, and emotional pain as a result of her recurrent vaginal tears. Every day, she deals with the effects of marital strife. The traditional practice of female genital mutilation (FGM) and the psychological manipulation that led up to her undergoing the surgery have ruined Tashi's life, she realizes now.

Despite not having anybody to pass the burden of suffering on to, Tashi feels compelled to rescue young ladies who are victims of similar tragedies. Additionally, she wants to get revenge for the psychological deception she endured, which escalates her violent tendencies. She travels to Olinka in order to eliminate M'Lissa, a mother circumciser who promotes and supports infibulation. Killing her in a cunning manner, she uses the same razors and blades that maimed her when she was younger. According to the patriarchal dictum, it is a blessing to be slain by one's infibulator, therefore M'Lissa is really glad that she killed her. She justifies her behavior by saying that was her means of subsistence and that she has no shame in covertly infibulating adolescents and young women since she, too, had been a victim of sexual assault and felt helpless. She dies after ridiculing Tashi for trusting her. Olinka is where Tashi will stand trial for the murder of a patriarchal national hero. Tashi, as a symbol of the African woman, shatters the

custom that prevented her from achieving completeness by murdering the tsunga. Tashi seeks revenge on the infibulator who injured her by murdering her; nevertheless, she is apprehended, stands trial, and receives the death penalty. M'Lissa's life becomes a burned out case, but her death purges her of her masochism and hysteria to a larger level. Because of her untreated psychological trauma and mental disorder, Tashi's narrative finishes on a negative note.

IV. CONCLUSION

The most heartbreaking part of female genital mutilation is the epidemic proportions to which blood-borne infections like HIV/AIDS have spread due to a lack of adherence to basic hygiene practices. In addition to the risks already mentioned, female circumcision may lead to a host of other complications, such as: painful periods, varicose veins, urinary infections, bladder difficulties, blood poisoning, pelvic inflation, painful sexual life, recurring vaginal fissures during vaginal intercourse, and an increased risk of HIV/AIDS. The treatment is seen as a necessary part of being a woman, even if it has horrible drawbacks. The agony that comes with it is stigmatized and ignored, and instead considered as a blessing that brings women femininity, marriage, and motherhood.

As a writer, feminist, and social activist, Walker finds her voice and accomplishes her aims via literature. Among Walker's numerous missions is the rescue of repressed Black women, whose plight she has been concerned about from the start of her career. The author, Walker, has dedicated a portion of the royalties from *Possessing the Secret of Joy* 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" (Walker 285) in an effort to perpetuate the resistance against female genital cutting.

To sum up, female genital mutilation (FGM) is a cultural practice that controls women's sexuality, maintains gender inequality in power, and reinforces male supremacy. This essay has emphasized the necessity to confront and eliminate detrimental practices such as female genital mutilation (FGM) by critically analyzing Alice Walker's *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. One way to create a more just world that treats women's bodies and sexuality with dignity is to advocate for women's independence and self-determination.

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