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3 April 2012

A Cut That Scars: Alice Walker's Novel *Possessing the Secret of Joy* and Female Genital Cutting

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## Abstract

### A Cut That Scars: Alice Walker's Novel *Possessing the Secret of Joy* and Female Genital Cutting

By Katie R. Levy

Walker presents many of the complex issues regarding female genital cutting in her novel *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. Of utmost importance, however, is the emphasis not just on the physical deterioration but also on the psychological destruction of mutilated women. It is worthy to note, however, that I have chosen the term female genital cutting (FGC) to refer to the practice in my honors thesis whereas Walker refers to the practice as female genital mutilation (FGM) in *Warrior Marks* and was steadfast in her reasoning for doing so. I have simply chosen FGC because the OrchidProject (one of the leading organizations striving to end FGC) uses the term bearing in mind that it holds less judgment, which is important when dealing with both the communities who prescribe to the practice and women who have been circumcised. That said, my own opinions of the practice are implicit in this thesis and in my agreement with Walker. I see FGC and FGM as compatible terms and as such they are used interchangeably within my thesis to refer to the practice.

My honors project encompasses an in-depth analysis of these themes as Walker portrays them. Walker indicts patriarchal society as necessitating the cutting of women. My first chapter, therefore, analyzes both Tashi's struggle to appease the Olinka men and her desire to maintain her unique cultural identity. Because Tashi views her circumcision as upholding Olinka tradition, her decision to be circumcised is one of the ways she strives to fight impending threats to the survival of her tribe. Walker criticizes the notion that FGC upholds tradition and cultural uniqueness. This chapter, therefore, analyzes cultural tradition and introduces many of Walker's scholarly inspirations on FGC and much of the corresponding thought regarding the perceived traditional nature of the practice. The second chapter analyzes Walker's radical indictment of women, particularly mothers, who force their own daughters to undergo the painful procedure. This chapter is substantiated with complimentary readings that analyze the disillusionment of the mother figure. Lastly, the final chapter examines Tashi's psychological journey, which Walker introduces through a Jungian lens. Each chapter seeks to address unique motifs that are inherent to the complex nature of FGC. The common theme, however, both in Walker's novel and in other scholarly publications on FGC is resistance. My honors thesis, therefore, brings to light the meditation on choice and the statement to resist that is intrinsic to *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. In so doing, it is my hope to highlight that *Possessing the Secret of Joy* is itself a manifesto calling for resistance and change.

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## Synopsis

In *Possessing the Secret of Joy* Walker reintroduces her reader to the character Tashi, who is first encountered in *The Color Purple*. Tashi, the protagonist of this novel, is introduced as a young girl living amongst the fictional Olinka tribe in Africa. Told through vignettes from all of the main characters the novel parses together Tashi's journey from her childhood to her death. The novel follows Tashi's life from her time as an ambitious and wild young girl through her circumcision during adolescence and ultimately her death. Because of missionary influences and her eldest daughter's death during the circumcision ritual, Tashi's mother chooses to convert to Christianity and spare Tashi from undergoing the procedure. In adolescence, however, Tashi hears the call of her Leader to maintain tribal tradition in the face of the impending missionary threat as an explicit call to undergo the circumcision ritual and thereby forever bind herself with her tribe. After this fateful decision, Tashi's existence is forever altered. Adam, a son of the missionaries and Tashi's closest friend from childhood, returns to Africa to marry Tashi and bring her to America. In America she is able to find solace and begin her psychological journey into understanding what it is she has lost and why she chose to be circumcised. This journey leads her to Switzerland where she meets *Mzee* (the Old Man) who is a fictional representation of Dr. Carl Jung. In the safety of his home, Tashi begins to uncover repressed memories of her childhood, specifically, the nature of her sister Dura's death. Tashi's journey continues upon her return to America where she works with Raye, another psychiatrist, who challenges her to understand why she decided to submit to the circumcision ritual. Tashi gives birth to a son Benny in an American hospital. The doctors try to salvage the baby and save Tashi from excessive pain and loss



of blood. In so doing they remark they have never seen a birth like this and Tashi states that it felt as if the whole hospital staff came to look at her. Benny, unfortunately, is left mentally handicapped. Because of Tashi's wounds and small opening, Benny is suffocated during the birth leading to several defects. The relationship between mother and son is always strained. Tashi returns to Africa with the intention of murdering M'Lissa, *the tsunga* who performed Tashi's circumcision. She stays with M'Lissa for some time before she is able to murder her. Afterwards Tashi is jailed, put on trial, and ultimately sentenced to death. The final chapter of the novel is told from the voice of Tashi's soul.

## Chapter One: Review of the Literature

The topic of my honors thesis is Alice Walker's novel *Possessing the Secret of Joy* and female genital cutting (FGC). I have analyzed the main themes in *Possessing the Secret of Joy* and the implications Walker's representation of FGC has on the larger body of literature regarding female mutilation. Walker's novel embodies an attempt to revolutionize masses of women by exposing them to the fictional depiction of what FGC is both psychologically and physically. Her novel thereby became one of the most radical and accessible texts on the subject of FGC. Other literature on the topic includes various accounts and manifestos like Awa Thiam's text *Black Sisters Speak out: Feminism and Oppression in Black Africa*, Mende Nazer's *Slave: My True Story*, Fran Hosken's *The Hosken Report*, Nawal El Saadawi's *The Hidden Face of Eve*, Hanny Lightfoot-Klein's *Prisoners of Ritual: An Odyssey into Female Genital Circumcision in Africa* and Jomo Kenyatta's *Facing Mount Kenya: The Tribal Life of the Gikuyu*. More broadly, however, there are other texts that are imperative to an overall understanding of *Possessing the Secret of Joy* and the psychology of mutilated women as Walker presents it. These include many Jungian psychology books, namely, Carl Jung's *Psychological Types*, Eric Neumann's *The Great Mother*, Mary Ann Mattoon's *Jung and the Human Psyche: An Understandable Introduction* and texts regarding Jungian Literary Criticism. Further, feminist theory was also important to understanding the implications of patriarchal society and the perpetuation of FGC. Dr. Genevieve's *The Motherhood Report*, Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex* and Debold, Wilson, and Malave's *Mother Daughter Revolution: From Betrayal to Power* were important to understanding the exploitation of the mother-daughter relationship within patriarchal society. While some of these texts

highlight important aspects of FGC, others introduce distinct concepts that relate to *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. It is my hope that by analyzing both FGC and other important themes in *Possessing the Secret of Joy* regarding psychology and feminist thought this honors thesis will expand on the body of literature that already exists regarding FGC and explain why FGC is perpetuated globally today.

Awa Thiam, in her text, *Black Sisters Speak Out: Feminism and Oppression in Black Africa* supports Walker's intention in *Possessing the Secret of Joy* that all women need to fight together for female liberation. Thiam identifies the plight of the Black African female as uniquely distinct but, like Walker, Thiam believes that all women must together defy their common oppressor: man and a dominant patriarchy. Thiam writes, "women there is a common denominator in your lives: phallogratic violence" (Thiam 124). In order to break this cycle of dominance, Thiam asserts that women must defy and rebel against this societal patriarchy. In so doing, she vindicates Walker's assertion that all women must bond together to fight. "It will take all of us working together to turn things around" (Walker, *Possessing* x). Thiam expands on Walker's call to fight, stating, "Their [women] common condition is one of exploitation and oppression by the same phallogratic system, whether it be Black, White or Yellow" (Thiam 53). The most important struggle that Thiam identifies is between dominated—women—and dominator—men. "As far as we are concerned, this human race consists of social classes and two categories of individuals: men and women, whose relationship to each other is that of dominating to dominated" (Thiam 13). Thiam's critique of patriarchy and her solutions for reform do, however, like Walker, assert that women have played a role in perpetuating their own domination. Her solutions for reform, therefore, include the

termination of FGC (female genital cutting) and other ritualistic practices that ultimately allow men to assert their power over women.

In *Black Sisters Speak Out* Thiam is extremely critical of the dominant patriarchy. She asserts that all women have suffered because of the patriarchal nature of society. In her critique of the patriarchal system, Thiam seeks to bind women of different class, race, ethnicity and color so that women can combat their common oppressor together. Thiam believes that overturning the dominant patriarchy, “amounts to challenging the structures of an entire society when this society is patriarchal in nature. All the problems of society – political, cultural, economic – are inextricably linked to the problem of women. [the status of women in society] The problem of women belongs in a general context” (Thiam 118). Because of the expansive nature of the patriarchal problem, Thiam asserts that women from different parts of the world must aid in the fight. “As women, we offer ourselves as the sisters of all oppressed women. Whether this sisterhood is accepted or not, it is there. It is offered” (Thiam 132). This sisterhood shares the commonality of sex, which according to Thiam has shaped nearly every society. Thiam therefore believes that women, despite socioeconomic and cultural differences, have the power to overturn the dominant patriarchy if they come together to resist.

In her discussion of the dominant patriarchy, Thiam asserts that all women should resist such patriarchal practices together, however, she does not believe that all women suffer the same repercussions from patriarchal societies. For example, although identifying commonalities in the plight of all women living within patriarchal societies, Thiam views the plight of African women as distinctly unique. She states that “Black women are fighting for survival as much in the field of institutions as in the manner of

her daily existence” (Thiam 55), which she sees as markedly different from the White woman who must fight solely for institutional change and can achieve immediate benefit from her struggles—even if they do not lead to entire social upheaval (Thiam). Thiam furthers her claim by stating that, “it is a recognized fact that in patriarchal societies the woman may not speak out” (Thiam 14). In so stating, she supports the idea Walker advances regarding the general refusal to defy and speak out against men. Like fictional Tashi, who is unable to break from the traditions of the Olinka tribe, Thiam’s interviews with real women depict a similar inability to fight and resist. The few interviewees who have tried to resist FGC are often shunned by their communities and met with hostilities from other women who persist in perpetuating FGC.

Thiam identifies FGC as the foremost form of physical implementation of subservience in a dominant patriarchy. She writes, “it [infibulation] constitutes the most eloquent expression of the control exercised by the phallocratic system over female sexuality” (Thiam 60). Women are the victims in this phallocratic system. By exerting control over the female body, the patriarchal system not only makes the female figure subservient but also victimizes her much like a slave. “As long as she – the female – is under the domination of the colonial – the male – her relationship to him will always be that of victim to victimizer” (Thiam 116). Thiam identifies “social pressure” (Thiam 65) as being so severe in some communities, that women are banished or considered unmarriageable if they are not circumcised. She reveals that in many societies, like that of the Dogon and Bambara in Mali, excision is “a matter of honour.” (Thiam 70) Moreover, if a child is uncircumcised the entire family risks being shunned. Thiam interviews women of all educational and cultural backgrounds, some who were forced to be excised

and do not see it as a negative custom and others who speak of their excision with horror and refuse to have their daughters submit to the practice. In some of these cases, the grandmothers, unbeknownst to their daughters, take their granddaughters to be excised. In all of the accounts, Thiam highlights the complicated nature of the circumcision practice and the horror associated with the mutilation of young adolescent girls.

Thiam does not simply indict men for their role in the patriarchal system, but is also critical of women for perpetuating male dominance by continuously submitting their daughters to harmful practices like FGC. Walker furthers this notion in her novel accusing women of perpetuating the practice of female genital mutilation. Thiam writes:

The majority of them inflict the same operations on their daughters, even though they are aware of the evils that can ensue . . . they do it in spite of the wishes of their daughters. In other words, they do it to avoid dissociating themselves from others; because, in their society or ethnic group it has to be done. (Thiam 84)

Significantly, Thiam, who cites Jacques Lanier's description of the ritual practice, selects a passage in which Lanier refers to the mother as the excisor. "The mother scrapes . . . the mother reaches . . . the mother lifts . . . makes a deep hole . . . separates . . . the mother completes her operation" (Thiam 58-59). The mother is thereby responsible for inflicting the pain of the circumcision ritual on her own daughter. Although critical of the role of mothers, grandmothers, and in-laws within the patriarchal system, Thiam does not find these figures to be entirely guilty. Walker, however, seems to struggle most with the mother figure who forces this traditional practice upon her unknowing daughter. Thiam finds women guilty of persecuting one another to live in the patriarchy into which they

have been born. “It would seem that males have forced women to become their own torturers, to butcher each other . . . This would partly explain the fact that women themselves take the responsibility for their own mutilation” (Thiam 75). Thiam describes the Bambara women she meets in Mali as women who “despise non-excised women” (Thiam 75). She sees their hatred as proof of the “pressure . . . that men have exercised over women, to reinforce attitudes towards these practices and so perpetuate them” (Thiam 75). Thiam does not only criticize women who have upheld cultural traditions but also celebrates the cultural identity they have helped to preserve:

But it was women in particular who took it upon themselves to preserve certain customs . . . It is because our mothers, our elders, had the charge of children that they were – and remain – responsible for training them, for transmitting certain myths and beliefs, and instilling in them a spirit of submission to customs. (Thiam 122)

Thiam pays tribute to the elders who have fought to preserve their cultural identity despite the many obstacles such preservation presented. She does not, however, envision this cultural preservation, as well as the preservation of FGC and other harmful practices, as resisting the power of the Western world. Walker’s depiction of Tashi’s circumcision also highlights the desire to resist the threat of Western civilization as a factor in perpetuating FGC. Thiam writes, “We must refute the claim that the preservation of those customs today is our way of resisting the ever-increasing power of neo-colonialism or imperialism” (Thiam 126). Such a justification, Thiam believes, gives false validation to harmful customary practices that should be eradicated.

Thiam strives to present the issue of patriarchy and cultural preservation in all of its complexity. In so doing, women are found guilty of perpetuating harmful practices but also are praised with upholding other unique traditional customs. Preservation is also complicated by the desire to remain independent and uninfluenced by encroaching imperialist powers. Of course, Thiam asserts that cultural independence is essential but that it cannot be used as an excuse to uphold practices like FGC.

Ultimately Thiam, like Walker, invokes defiance as the sole means for revolution. “There is a choice. We can rebel and fight. And this is what we have done. It would be a fine thing to see all excised and infibulated women rising up in their own countries in revolt against these practices; this would soon sow confusion in the ranks of our Black African brothers” (Thiam 77). Central to achieving freedom from patriarchal society is the dissolution of the practice of mutilation. Thiam criticizes intellectuals who try to defend the practice, stating, “The fact that some Black intellectuals insist on maintaining the ‘barbaric’ practices of their ancestors, including excision, may well prove to stem from a concern to recover their essence, their specificity” (Thiam 82). The insistence to return to traditional roots (Thiam 82) is something Thiam views as embedded in Africa’s colonial past. She writes that perhaps it is this desire to maintain what is culturally and uniquely African that gives such customs like FGC added importance. Despite the importance of tradition and culture, Thiam writes that, “this practice can no longer be tolerated” (Thiam 86).

To combat practices like FGC Thiam suggests that the entire social order must be overturned. “We must attack the social structures which uphold these practices . . . by undertaking campaigns through the press, in the countries concerned *and* abroad” (Thiam



86). Thiam does not exclude outside efforts nor does she believe that the fight to overturn patriarchy and end FGC should be fought solely by African women. The involvement of all women to fight the battles concerning their sex is something Thiam believes to be of supreme importance. Many of the interviewees expressed similar desires. Women who were progressive or concerned with changing the cyclical enslavement to the practice of mutilation felt, “nothing can be done to abolish them unless the women concerned group together to impose their point of view” (Thiam 64). Thiam supports outside efforts so long as they do not undermine the importance of African culture, tradition, and are without judgment. Further, all efforts, according to Thiam, must acknowledge that the black woman’s “sufferings are greater than those of men, for she is not only faced with White racism, the exploitation of her race by the colonial, but also the domination that men, Black as well as White, exercise over her, by virtue of the patriarchal system in which both live” (Thiam 116). It is with these conditions that Thiam believes women should together strive to fight the dominant patriarchy under which almost all societies function.

In her text *Excising the Spirit: A Literary Analysis of Female Circumcision* Linda Strong-Leek also examines Walker’s intention in *Possessing the Secret of Joy* and its depiction of FGC. In her discussion of FGC in literature, Leek identifies three texts, Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s novel *The River Between*, Kassindja’s memoir *Do They Hear You When You Cry?* and Walker’s novel *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. The other two texts serve to introduce the way FGC is written about prior to Walker’s novel, which Leek states definitively changed the way FGC was portrayed in literature. “Alice Walker’s *Possessing the Secret of Joy* is the most controversial text in this analysis. It is the only

fictional text in this study that was written with an explicit political purpose: to end ‘female genital mutilation’” (Leek 146). Leek continues to state that, “Walker asserts that she wrote this novel ‘as a duty to my conscience . . . to write a book such as this, about a subject such as genital mutilation, is in fact . . . the reason for my education” (Leek 147). Leek thereby concludes that, “this book was published with a stated, calculated objective: to illustrate the horrors of female circumcision and bring about its total abolition” (Leek 147). Leek is critical of Tashi’s finding respite in the United States, especially because she believes Walker is overly critical of a cultural tradition to which she is an outsider. In her discussion of FGC, Leek, like Walker, analyzes the psychological ramifications as well as the role of women in the customary practice.

Because Walker is African American, Leek is highly critical of the imposition of Western values on her protagonist Tashi who only feels safe in the United States. Leek introduces Kassindja’s memoirs as direct evidence to the contrary for circumcised women. In this work, Kassinja negates Walker’s “affirmations that African women will find respite in the United States” (Leek 149). Leek does not mention, however, Mende Nazer’s autobiography *Slave: My True Story*, which like Kassinja’s memoir, describes Nazer’s escape and ultimate refuge in England. Nazer, however, credits her gaining of asylum as the sole reason why she is still alive. “London became my new home and the place where I first tasted freedom . . . to me freedom is a treasure that I would not give up for all the world” (Nazer 311). Intrinsic to this criticism is the notion that Walker is subconsciously inserting the prevailing Western tendency to assert that Western culture is in some way superior to its African counterpart. Leek asserts that this is the reason why Walker chose to depict her protagonist as free only in the Western world. People like

Thiam, Mende Nazer, Engugi, and Nawal El Saadawi, published authors who have publically condemned mutilation as the primary form of female enslavement are not condemned by Leek, but Walker, simply because of her ethnicity, is considered unfit to judge FGC. Leek writes that:

Walker's presentation remains controversial. She is unwilling to participate in a conversation that articulates, in any manner, the cultural importance of the circumcision ritual and the initiation ceremonies that it so often accompanies. She portrays the character of the *tsunga* . . . in such a horrific manner that it is impossible for anyone to feel any sympathy for her . . . Walker presents the circumcision ritual in monolithic terms..." (Leek 155)

Leek already acknowledges that Walker had an explicit political purpose in writing this novel: to eradicate FGC. In so doing, it would make sense that her portrayal of female circumcision would not encompass any varied depiction of what she considers to be mutilation.

Leek persists by claiming that Western feminists should not involve themselves in the practices of other cultures. She writes:

It is not the responsibility of Western feminists to continue to decide the fates of peoples in other cultures . . . as Diana Meyers have observed, women in the West seem to have no problem taking their daughters through years of painful plastic surgery to achieve their ideal of the perfect body, or even facial surgeries for the same reasons that African women undergo circumcision, to please men. (Leek 160)

This is an insufficient answer to a grave problem affecting over one hundred million women worldwide (Walker, *Warrior Marks*). It also is a mistaken criticism of Walker's commentary on FGC, which in *Warrior Marks* includes a criticism of Western practices such as plastic surgery to appeal to the dominant patriarchy.

Thiam asserts that although cultural preservation is extremely important, harmful practices that imprison the female in the name of culture must be halted. Thiam acknowledges the importance of having cultural traditions that make a society unique and is critical of the tendency to view Western cultural values as superior; perhaps this is the connection Leek strives but fails to make in her criticism of Walker. By suggesting that Tashi can only find solace in the Western world Leek believes Walker is asserting that Western culture is superior. I believe, however, that Walker conveys the nature of Tashi's solace as stemming from the belief that she has arrived in a place where genital mutilation is entirely unknown. Walker depicts the futility of Tashi's safety net, however, when Raye introduces Tashi to a patient who was circumcised as a child in New Orleans. Similarly, Tashi struggles with being defined as an outsider due to the stench of her scars and the exposure to doctors during the birth of her son. In this manner, Walker addresses similar issues that Kassinja raises about feeling like an outsider in a foreign land upon gaining asylum in the United States. As Thiam writes and as womanists like Walker note, there is a clear distinction between the problems facing African women and those facing Western White women. These distinctions, however, do not preclude all women from joining together to fight against the patriarchy that has enslaved them. In Thiam's analysis she regards this as absolutely necessary in order to have any success in rebelling against the dominant patriarchy that affects all women.

Leek also challenges Walker's assertion that FGC can have no positive effects on a woman. Her reasoning is that despite suffering severe psychological and physical damages, Tashi is able to find joy at the novel's conclusion. I will seek to disprove this claim, proving instead, that although Tashi is unable to obtain joy in her life, the final message at the novel's conclusion is that there is hope for future generations in the form of resistance; Walker makes this claim, like Thiam, by having M'bati reveal resistance to be the secret to possessing joy at the novel's conclusion. Leek writes:

It is obvious from Walker's deeply disturbing portrayal of the tradition that, because the ritual has such overwhelmingly damaging effects on women, she believes that the eradication of female circumcision is the only resolution. And yet, though Tashi is traumatically physically and emotionally scarred by the ritual, her scar and suffering transform her in the end to one who, in Walker's vision, truly finds 'the Secret of Joy.' (Leek 153)

Tashi is publically executed at the novel's conclusion, her abhorrent death does not seem to be a depiction of one who 'truly finds 'the Secret of Joy.''" Leek further states that, "She [Walker] becomes the healer/savior of women whose bodies have been mutilated and spirits destroyed by circumcision. She redefines Tashi's scars because although Tashi experiences an anguish that is worse than death, she triumphs through her own death, by taking control of her life and giving meaning to her suffering" (Leek 154). In *Possessing the Secret of Joy* there is very little redemptive quality to Tashi's character. Ultimately, she is a woman who is so severely psychologically damaged that she is unable to will herself to live, let alone fight for life. Tashi's redemption, as Walker presents it, stems from the women who gather from surrounding villages to join in the first form of

resistance introduced in the novel at Tashi's death. Walker thereby creates a hope for a redemptive future. She does not, however, redeem Tashi's past.

Leek identifies Tashi's desire to be circumcised as having historic grounding. "To be a 'real' Kikuyu, male or female, is to remain faithful to tribal custom, to submit to circumcision. The circumcision ritual, then, became an act of rebellion against colonial policymakers" (Leek 15). This is much of the reason why Tashi chooses to undergo facial scarring in *The Color Purple* and similarly to be circumcised in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. Leek also goes to great lengths to establish the anthropological beliefs, as they are culturally perceived in some African communities that perpetuate FGC. The belief that, "the clitoris represents 'maleness' and for a man to assert complete masculinity, a woman must not have a clitoris, or anything that 'resembles' a penis . . . because the clitoris represents the male portion of the female soul, it must be excised in order for woman to attain full female status" (Leek 39). Walker also relays this anthropological fable in her novel through the voice of Pierre who tells Tashi that the traditional reasoning behind her circumcision is to ensure that what is considered masculine in women is removed. The notion that women are born with something unfeminine or unclean that must be removed in order for them to achieve their full status as a female only further demonstrates Thiam's belief that circumcision is the primary way in which women are subjected to male patriarchy. Women are circumcised so that they can fulfill their place in society as man's subservient.

Despite her criticisms of *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, Leek, like Walker, accuses women of being partially responsible for upholding this custom. "Older women in the cultures under consideration curse the fate which caused them to be born female . . . thus

older women are often the firmest holders of traditional custom” (Leek 48). Leek notes that women are the upholders of such a custom and in so doing ensure their survival under the current patriarchal system. “Hence, the need to maintain this ritual is not based solely on one’s tradition outlook, but it is also crucial to the actual physical survival of women in patriarchal systems” (Leek 49). Women are guilty of perpetuating the practice of mutilation by ensuring that their daughters adhere to such customs. “Though they experienced pain and degradation, women believe that it is right that their daughters are circumcised, and do not expect them to question their lot as the weaker sex . . . these women assert that the rituals sustain younger women by making them stronger, preparing them to accept their subservient position” (Leek 49). Belkis Wolde Giorgis, in a 1981 study by the Economic Commission for Africa (Okome), supports Leek’s assertion that women “themselves perpetuate sexual inequality” (Leek 49). Leek credits Walker with the ability to undo the idealized perceptions of the mother figure in her novel in order to demonstrate the failure to adequately protect daughters.

Walker, both in *Possessing the Secret of Joy* and *Warrior Marks* indicts the mother figure as failing to perform her maternal duty of protecting her young. Thiam, Leek, and other writers, while acknowledging that women fail to fight against their prescribed role in patriarchal society, are less severe in their criticism of women than Walker because they view this behavior as a means for survival. In order for change to occur all of these scholars believe that women must learn to fight and overthrow the patriarchy, however, they acknowledge, unlike Walker, that perhaps by continuing the cycle of circumcision, these mothers are fighting to ensure that their daughters survive under the current system, since they feel they lack the means or power to change it.

Leek also analyzes Walker's interpretation of the severe psychological damages of FGC. She writes:

It has been thoroughly illustrated in this work that female circumcision, particularly Pharonic circumcision, causes a number of physical and psychological problems. So, Walker may be justified here due to the severe manifestations of distress that are a documented result of Pharonic circumcision. (Leek 161)

Leek goes on to discuss Tashi's identity as intrinsically linked to tradition. Tashi struggles from her introduction in *The Color Purple* to build an identity that exists separately from her tribal identity. Leek writes, "There is . . . a connection between Tashi's history and her developing identity: she does not know who she is outside tradition" (Leek 166) Upon leaving her Olinka tribe, however, Tashi is catapulted "to the point she believes Efuru and Muthoni most probably should have attained: outrage" (Leek 169). Outrage is what leads Tashi back to Africa to confront her circumciser. Leek credits Walker with detailing what her predecessors (Muthoni and Efuru) had not: "the severe physical and psychological consequences of circumcision" (Leek 169). Leek praises Walker for her ability to highlight the horrors of FGC and yet is still critical of her failure as a Western feminist to attempt to highlight positive aspects of genital mutilation, which Leek herself seems unable to define.

To be so overly critical of a novel that Leek already acknowledges as having a clear agenda (to end FGC) seems superfluous and unfair. Thiam, along with other women who detail their own personal experiences in the works of Saadawi, Nazer, and Lightfoot-



Klein, assert that a communal effort of women worldwide must be taken to eradicate FGC. Everyone has a distinct culture, ethnicity and identity. Walker simply tells the fictional story of one woman who is severely broken, to her dying day, because of her mutilation. She relays the most severe consequences of FGC to a Western audience largely unfamiliar with the practice. Thiam interviews several women who insist that they still enjoy intercourse. She also, however, interviews a majority of women who are subjected to polygamy and forms of sexual abuse and assault including but not limited to genital mutilation. It is important to note that in these African cultures this is the way the patriarchy is prevalent and tangible. In Western communities some women have failed to rebel against a similar patriarchy that is simply advanced in a different manner. Leek identifies the physical nature of conforming to this patriarchy in the form of plastic surgery amongst other operations. Women everywhere, however, are subjected to a dominant patriarchy, and in certain cases, undergo such forms of physical mutilation to make themselves 'better fit' the male ideal.

Walker is particularly critical of the role women play in perpetuating FGC. I will, therefore, look closely at the institution of motherhood, in particular, the false idealization of the mother figure. In so doing, there are two important texts that I will examine. The first, *The Motherhood Report* presents testimony from a large sample of mothers in order to help explain why and how the myth surrounding the mother figure has been constructed. "Ideas and images about motherhood are formed long before a woman has her first child" (Genevie 2). Most women in the survey were guilty of idealizing motherhood. "The majority of women of all ages and educational backgrounds (about 70 percent) were neither realistic nor pessimistic but extraordinarily illusionistic in

their visions of what motherhood would be like” (Genevie 5). Motherhood is presented as an idealized institution because of the consistent tendency for daughters to romanticize their mothers. There are two important mother-child relationships presented in Walker’s text, the first is that of Tashi and her own mother, the second, Tashi and her son Benny.

*The Motherhood Report* begins to interpret why it is that some mothers are more loving than others and where the root of that phenomenon lies. Understanding why some mothers are more capable of loving their children is extremely important to Tashi’s relationship with Benny. Tashi is unable to love Benny the way she desires to love her own offspring because of the constant reminder of the pain caused by his birth and because she feels responsible for Benny’s disabilities, which were caused by the scars of her mutilation. Dr. Genevie also discusses the strain of pregnancy and strives to break down the illusion surrounding the birthing process. He concludes that women who have difficulty during their pregnancy or while giving birth are psychologically affected afterwards. “There is always a certain degree of conscious or unconscious tension during pregnancy that comes from fear and apprehension of childbirth—a peak experience in almost every mother’s life” (Genevie 109). Add the horror of Tashi’s circumcision and excess apprehension and it is understandable why her psychological state was altered. “How a woman experiences childbirth . . . has as much to do with her emotional state as it does with the physical aspect of the process” (Genevie 110). Because Tashi’s experience is wrought with complications and pain she resolves never to go through the birthing process again, aborting a second pregnancy.

It is also noteworthy that Tashi gives birth to Benny, a male. The sex of a child affects the way the mother relates to her baby. For Tashi, who is unable to trust men after

her circumcision, giving birth to a son only enhances her detachment from her child. Tashi refers to M'Bati as the daughter she might have but could not conceive. As such she has illusions about how she would have protected M'Bati from the harmful practice of mutilation and the realities of the patriarchy into which they were both born. She is unable, however, to protect or even love her own son. Because Tashi has subconsciously identified the dominant patriarchy, she is fearful of all men, including her husband and son, to a certain extent. Dr. Genevie identifies the effect of a child's sex on the mother-child relationship. "Most mothers felt they did not relate to sons and daughters in the same way. Many women not only related to their male and female children differently, they treated and raised them differently" (Genevie 198). This is true in the case of Tashi who laments never having a daughter of her own.

Further, *The Motherhood Report* addresses that a woman's ability to love her own child is affected by her relationship to her own mother. This once again perpetuates the idea that motherhood is an ongoing and evolving institution. "A woman's ability to be loving toward her children was affected by how loving and accepting she felt her own mother was toward her" (Genevie 81). Tashi idealizes her mother and represses moments that taint her memory of her own mother. Ultimately, however, Tashi's mother fails to adequately protect her from the dominant patriarchy. Further, Tashi, as an adult, begins to realize that despite having idealized her mother as a young girl, she did not possess the strength that Tashi envisioned her mother having but rather simply had the will to endure the status quo of the patriarchal Olinka society.

In addition to providing information regarding the idealized mother, Dr. Genevie also discusses the adolescent years, which are intended to be "the rebellious years"

(Genevie 152). Tashi and other circumcised girls do not go through this stage of defiance and rebellion. In fact, circumcision is meant to quell any such feeling amongst young girls. During this phase a child, “seeks a new ego ideal compatible with his concept of himself as an adult.” (Genevie 110). Because young circumcised girls do not experience this stage of development, circumcision serves its exact intended purpose as many scholars have identified it, which is to make women obedient, passive, and as Walker symbolically indicates, move with a passive gait.

Debold, Wilson, and Malave together wrote *Mother Daughter Revolution: From Betrayal to Power*. This text is fundamental to the analysis of motherhood in *Possessing the Secret of Joy* because it posits the mother daughter relationship as being the most fundamental in its strict adherence to patriarchy. These women believe that if this relationship is revolutionized and changed that societal patriarchy can be broken. Mothers, according to the authors, teach survival within a patriarchal confine rather than how to break the traditions of the dominant patriarchy. “She taught me beauty was essential—hadn’t it helped her survive? She taught me men were essential” (Debold, Wilson, and Malave xii). The findings in their study are largely based on The Harvard Project on Women’s Psychology and Girls’ Development led by Carol Gilligan. This study analyzes women in adolescence and concludes that:

Girl’s self-esteem plummets at adolescence . . . at the edge of adolescence they begin taking in what they are told about how girls *should* be and come to see how women are treated in this society. At first, they resist . . . but they become overwhelmed . . . by the idealization and exploitation of their budding sexuality, by violence, and by increasing injunctions to be silent. Too often, they give up

their resistance and give in to what society wants them to be. (Debold, Wilson, and Malave xiv)

The added confusion and pain FGC brings the adolescent girl, as Walker presents, is detrimental to a girl's development into womanhood. Walker faults the mother with failing to protect her daughter. The mother knows the harm FGC causes and yet blindly leads her unknowing daughter through the customary 'coming of age' rite. Mothers perpetuate this cycle because as Gilligan identifies, "girls give up relationship—with themselves and their own knowledge, desires, and needs—to secure relationships as prescribed in patriarchal culture" (Debold, Wilson, and Malave 11). For this reason, women abandon their daughters' personal needs in adolescence to ensure that they will meet the standard patriarchal society demands and thereby be accepted.

These authors indict mothers for conforming to the role patriarchal society has asserted for them. They claim that mothers recognize, "the role that they have been asked to play as conduits and, thus, perpetrators of the dominant culture. We wanted to help them see in a new way that mothers *can* transmit a different culture" (Debold, Wilson, and Malave xvi). By transforming the relationship between mothers and daughters there will be "a powerful catalyst for social change," (Debold, Wilson, and Malave xvi) because women will slowly begin "to resist, that is, to fight against the silencing messages that girls receive from the culture" (Debold, Wilson, and Malave xvi). Debold, Wilson and Malave view the relationship between mothers and daughters as significant in reshaping the entire social order. By resisting women can begin to reshape society and overthrow the dominant patriarchy. Much like Walker and Thiam, these authors view resistance as the primary means towards enacting social reform.

Debold, Wilson, and Malave therefore, view mothers as having failed to protect their daughters to some extent. By raising daughters to conform to the same societal principles that diminish female freedom, the authors of this text find fault with the institution of motherhood. Walker presents the failure to protect adolescent girls and instead teach them how to flourish within patriarchal society in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. Debold, Wilson, and Malave assert that mothers must begin to mother differently in order to “confront the status quo, which in our culture is patriarchy (a synonym for ‘civilization’ in Western culture)” (Debold, Wilson, and Malave 6). Further because “mothers are set up in patriarchal culture by lies told about separation [between mother and daughter] . . . this lie . . . leads mothers into an unintentional betrayal of daughters” (Debold, Wilson, and Malave 17). Rather than condemn mothers as Walker does, Debold, Wilson, and Malave identify the reasoning for this betrayal and assert how this relationship can be revolutionized to undo patriarchal society.

An analysis of Jungian concepts is also necessary in order to adequately understand Walker’s portrayal of FGC and Tashi’s psychological journey. Mary Ann Mattoon in *Jung and the Human Psyche: An Understandable Introduction* explains various Jungian concepts that Walker introduces in the novel. Mattoon offers rudimentary definitions of Jungian terms and concepts that are fundamental to understanding Tashi’s dreams and repressed memories within *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. Jung divides the psychological experience into the human conscious and unconscious. He views both experiences as fundamental to the overall human psychosis. Mattoon defines Jung’s *Ego* as “the center of consciousness—initiator, director and observer of one’s conscious experiences” (Mattoon 19). The second key term, the *shadow* refers to “the psychic

contents that a person prefers not to show or even to acknowledge” (Mattoon 28). The *shadow* comprises repressed thought that a person may not consciously be aware of. Tashi does not have conscious memories of her sister Dura’s death, rather, such memories are revealed to her only in associated images and dreams. Jung viewed dreams as imperative to the experience of the psyche because he believed that it was through dreams that many repressed thoughts were revealed. “Jung advised that we carry each dream around, turn it over and over, look at it from every perspective” (Mattoon 116). It is not until Tashi arrives at *Mzee*’s house and begins to study her dreams that she uncovers repressed memories from her childhood and circumcision. Jung believed that such dreams provide the individual conscious with imperative information. The unconscious psyche provides information that is needed by consciousness” (Mattoon 127). Jung therefore saw dreams as fundamental to the human experience. “Dreams aid us in understanding ourselves and our motives, enriched with possibilities for further development, and strengthened in our ability to make valid decisions” (Mattoon 132). In *Possessing the Secret of Joy* Tashi’s unconscious thought and the expression of her dreams are vital to understanding why she is so damaged.

Jungian concepts are also fundamental to *Possessing the Secret of Joy* because Jung did not only analyze the individual’s psyche but also described the ‘collective unconscious’ through which he believed all humans related. “Jung made an enormous contribution by defining the collective unconscious and describing its contents, which he called archetypes” (Mattoon 31). Jung envisioned the collective unconscious as pervading all cultures and societies. The archetype is defined as a “typical [uniform and recurring] mode of apprehension” (Mattoon 36). Eric Neumann, a contemporary of

Jung's, expands on the symbolism of the archetype stating, "The symbolism of the archetype is its manifestation in specific psychic images, which are perceived by consciousness and which are different for each archetype. The different aspects of an archetype are also manifest in different images" (Neumann 3). In the novel, Pierre describes the specific archetypal image of the feminine unconscious as relating to the termite hill and the initial excision of the female. *Possessing the Secret of Joy* draws parallels between women in all cultures, time periods, and societies describing the fundamental experience amongst all such women. In so doing, Walker invokes the Jungian collective unconscious.

Eric Neumann's *The Great Mother* expands on Jung's notion of the collective unconscious. Neumann asserts that the image of 'the Great Mother' is the oldest archetype transcending all cultures and societies. (Neumann). He analyzes the various images associated with the archetype of 'the Great Mother' and divides them into several subcategories. The intended purpose, however, is to assert that these associations with 'the Great Mother' archetype exist outside of our intelligible conscious. It is a phenomenon that transcends consciousness and is eternal. Neumann writes:

For this reason Jung says that 'the archetypes exist preconsciously, and presumably they form the structural dominants of the psyche in general . . . in other words, the 'archetype' . . . is a nuclear phenomenon transcending consciousness, and its 'eternal presence' is nonvisible. But not only does it act as a magnetic field, directing the unconscious behavior of the personality through the pattern of behavior set up by the instincts; it also operates as a pattern of vision in



the consciousness, ordering the psychic material into symbolic images. (Neumann 6)

The archetype, as Neumann asserts, is what operates the unconscious. Tashi uncovers various images expressed through her dreams and in doing so is able to access memories that she has repressed from her conscious. Such memories relate to the image of 'the Great Mother,' and Tashi's idealization of her own mother. Tashi's dreams also enable her to accept the true nature of her sister's death as murder, something she was unable to do beforehand. In a letter to Alice Walker, Efua Dorkenoo, the founder of FORWARD (a British charity fighting to end FGC), writes, "what I want to say is that you have written about the psychosis of an African woman. Although mutilation is part of a continuum of the control of women's sexuality worldwide, FGM is the core of African women's oppression" (Alice Walker Papers, Manuscripts, Archives, and Rare Books Library, Emory University). Walker views the mutilation of women as something that unifies and connects women from all different societies and cultures. She undertakes a fictional analysis of one woman who has been mutilated in order to reveal the damage that FGC causes, not just physically, but also psychologically.

## Chapter Two: Patriarchal Society and the Perpetuation of Female Genital Cutting

“Female genital mutilation is one of the least researched, least resourced, least talked about issues that the world faces today. It is a gross abuse of human rights, of child rights, of health rights. Over 140 million women bear the consequences. 3 million girls in Africa alone are cut a year. This is not just an African problem -- it happens in Indonesia, Malaysia, Yemen, UAE, Kurdistan and of course, as we now know, in the US, Australia, and across the EU. This is a global problem and it is our problem.”

(Julia Lalla-Maharajh “Dancing to End Female Genital Cutting”)

Female Genital Cutting (FGC)<sup>1</sup> is a destructive practice that two million women undergo every year worldwide (Hosken). In 1979 the World Health Organization (WHO) held a conference on the “Traditional Practices Affecting the Health of Women” in Khartoum, Sudan. Fran Hosken and Hanny-Lightfoot Klein identify this as, “the moment that began a cautious campaign against the little known and even less discussed but widespread practice of female sexual mutilation in Africa” (Lightfoot-Klein ix).

Although the history of female genital cutting is extensive and complex, it is fundamental to understanding how the practice has changed and why it continues today. Alice Walker first encountered FGC at the age of twenty on a trip to Kenya. Her years of being an editor at *Ms. Magazine* gave her the courage to speak out against the practice. (Walker, *Possessing* viii). Walker’s subsequent journey would lead her to publish *Possessing the Secret of Joy* in 1992 and film the documentary *Warrior Marks* in 1993. In *Possessing the Secret of Joy* Walker invokes Tashi’s circumcision<sup>2</sup> and ensuing experience to examine several of the reasons why circumcision flourishes in many communities.

Tashi’s journey towards understanding her decision to be circumcised reveals several

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<sup>2</sup> I use the term circumcision when appealing to the idea that this serves as a cultural rite of passage in many communities. The use of the term in this paper in no way condones the practice or denotes any kind of agreement with it. The terms circumcision, FGC, FGM and mutilation all refer to the same practice of genital cutting.

important reasons as to how young girls fall prey to this practice. Walker analyzes the desire to be accepted by the dominant patriarchal society, preserve cultural tradition in spite of the looming missionary threat, and be deemed 'honorable' as several of the reasons why Tashi ultimately decides to be circumcised. Walker is responsible for introducing the horrors of genital cutting, as she perceived them, to a largely uninformed Western audience. In so doing, she indicted a prevailing male patriarchy for using this practice of mutilation to dominate women. Walker joined herself with Awa Thiam, Fran Hosken, and Nawal El Saadawi as some of the few women to define FGC in patriarchal terms.

Walker radicalized the discussion of FGC in *Possessing the Secret of Joy* by defining genital cutting in relation to patriarchal society. Although many feminists were outraged by Walker's assignment of blame to women, in particular, mothers who perpetuate FGC, she effectively identified many of the grassroots problems associated with the practice. Walker's claims are substantiated by the interviews she conducts, even with a female circumciser, in her documentary and accompanying book *Warrior Marks*. Despite Walker's knowledge on FGC, many critics depicted her as an outsider, a Westerner, interpreting African customs through her Western lens and thereby blamed her for falling prey to cultural imperialism. Although as Awa Thiam states every person has the tendency to interpret cultures through the value system he or she has previously been exposed to (Thiam), Walker was certainly not an ignorant bystander. She spent decades educating herself about FGC. The culmination of this education is *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, in which, Walker portrays the worst kind of circumcision. Walker writes, "many who read this novel will not be prepared for the world that it exposes. I understand

. . . I have done the best that I could with a challenging subject” (Walker, *Possessing* ix). In her analysis Walker paints FGC as a custom that inherently enslaves women to the perpetuation of patriarchy. Tashi’s pharaonic circumcision is portrayed as completely debilitating and ultimately destroys her.

Although the exact origins of female circumcision cannot be traced, it is known that the circumcision rite has occurred since antiquity. “Excision practices can be assumed to date back thousands of years, conceivably to the early beginnings of mankind” (Lightfoot-Klein 27). Many argue that the origins of excision come from Islam. As Awa Thiam points out, however, “in fact, there is no allusion to this [practice of excision] in the Koran, the basis of the Muslim religion, which can be verified by referring to the Arabic text . . . at the time of the prophet Mahomet, excision was already a current practice” (Thiam 58-60). There have been historic documents dating from that of the famous historian, Herodotus, that report on the prevalence of circumcision and conclude that the practice originated in Ethiopia or Egypt. Similarly, a Greek papyrus held in the British Museum cites circumcision as occurring when young girls were given their dowries. Other historic accounts from the Greek geographer Strabo conclude that circumcision was performed as a premarital rite. Some documents observe circumcision to be a mark of distinction while in other societies it was deemed a mark of enslavement (Lightfoot-Klein 27-28).

Despite the various historic accounts, many contemporary scholars suggest that the prevalence of excision today stems from an obsession with chastity amongst women. “At what period these practices came into conjunction with the obsessive preoccupation with virginity and chastity that today still characterizes . . . cultures is not known, but

infibulation clearly appears to be a result of that meeting” (Lightfoot-Klein 27). Female circumcision has complex origins because diverse communities have performed it for various reasons over the course of thousands of years. Hanny Lightfoot-Klein, unlike many other prominent scholars on FGC, is unable to find fault with a dominant patriarchy but rather states, “I looked for villains in this conundrum, and I found none. I found instead men and women entrapped in an antiquated ritual, dating heaven only knows how far back into history, unable to free themselves from its centuries-old enmeshment, all of them its prisoners” (Lightfoot-Klein ix). Unlike Lightfoot-Klein, however, many other writers and activists view FGC as intrinsically linked to the existence of a dominant patriarchy. Although there are several different operations encompassed under FGC, infibulation and excision are overwhelmingly the most prevalent; Walker’s protagonist Tashi is infibulated. “Most women . . . are circumcised pharaonically. This type of circumcision involves the excision of the clitoris, labia minora, and fleshy inner layers of the labia majora. The remaining skin is then fused over the wound and sutured down to a pinhole opening. This fusion is called infibulation.” (Lightfoot-Klein 4). Other modified practices include sunna and excision or clitoridectomy<sup>3</sup> (Hosken 33). Regardless of the historical roots, today, it is clear, especially because infibulation and excision are so common (Hosken 33), that circumcision is performed to perpetuate female subservience and acquiescence.

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<sup>3</sup> Sunna means tradition in Arabic, it involves the removal of the prepuce and the tip of the clitoris. It is considered the mildest form of circumcision. It is rarely performed in Africa and the Middle East. Excision/Clitoridectomy consists of the removal of the clitoris and adjacent parts including the labia minora and sometimes all exterior genitalia. Infibulation/Pharaonic Circumcision involves the removal of the clitoris and labia minora as well as the labia majora and the two sides of the vulva are sewn together over the vagina with thorns or sticky paste.

Although Tashi, the protagonist in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, is from a fictional community that Walker coins the Olinka tribe, FGC occurs throughout a widespread and diverse geographical distribution. Today, Thiam identifies excision and infibulation as occurring:

In the Ivory Coast, Burkina Faso (originally Upper Volta), Mali, Guinea, Niger, Senegal, Somalia, Sudan, among the Afar and Issas, in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Ethiopia, Yemen, Iraq, Jordan, Syria, Southern Algeria and Benin. In the countries of Black Africa, Muslims, Christians and Animists are alike affected. We find the custom among such ethnic groups as the Tukolor, the Diolas, Mandingoes, and some sections of the Serer tribes. It is widespread among Muslims in certain Arab countries. (Thiam 58)

Despite being widespread throughout Africa, FGC occurs in the US and Europe as well. Hosken, in her 1993 text, reported that over one hundred million women have undergone this ritualistic circumcision (Hosken 44). The Orchid Project, one of the largest agencies fighting FGC today, estimates that this number has now risen to 140 million. This is, in part, due to the clandestine mutilations that occur in the US and Europe. A recent battle in the UK posed the legality of FGC after a BBC documentary examined the prevalence of FGC amongst Diaspora communities. The result was a parliamentary ban on the practice. The legality of FGC, however, remains in dispute in the Western world today.

The US has its own history with circumcision practices. “In the United States American physicians not only adopted clitoridectomy for quite a number of years . . . in addition . . . another form of surgery was tried in the United States to prevent

masturbation: the labia were infibulated. This practice continued to be used until 1905” (Lightfoot-Klein 180). Walker presents this history in *Possessing the Secret of Joy* when Tashi’s vision of a safe and perfect America comes undone. Amy, one of Tashi’s psychologist’s patients, is introduced to Tashi as a “Southern belle” (Walker, *Possessing* 184). Amy, however, recounts her childhood story to Tashi stating, “When I was a very little girl I used to touch myself . . . there. It was a habit that mortified my mother. When I was three years old she bound my hands each night before I was put to bed . . . at six years of age our family doctor was asked to excise my clitoris” (Walker, *Possessing* 185). Tashi, in disbelief, asks Amy if New Orleans is America for she “saw the healthy green leaves of my America falling seared to the ground. Her sparkling rivers muddy with blood” (Walker, *Possessing* 185). Even today, however, FGC is an imminent problem in the US. In Georgia in 2006 Khalid Adem was the first man to be prosecuted and convicted in the US for mutilating his two-year old daughter with a pair of scissors. Since then a law was put into effect in Georgia making FGC illegal. Despite this law, another case of a mother circumcising her daughter occurred in Georgia in 2010.<sup>4</sup> The history of FGC is of a global nature; each country and community possesses its own story or hidden past with female genital cutting. Walker highlights this in her novel but chooses to use a fictitious society as necessitating Tashi’s mutilation.

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<sup>4</sup> Khalid Adem was charged and convicted for aggravated battery and cruelty to children. He was sentenced to 2 terms of 15 years consecutively. He was also fined \$5,000. The Prime Minister of Ethiopia Meles Zenawi spoke out and said that you cannot jail an entire community if an entire community is involved in FGC, rather, you must “change the mindset and that takes time.” A law outlawing FGC in Georgia was subsequently passed in 2005. In 2010 a similar case occurred in La Grange Georgia. The infant was less than a year old when her 35-year old mother attempted to excise her. The outcome of this case is unknown, but the mother is being tried under the new Georgia laws. (Gordon “Mother in Georgia Charged with Female Genital Mutilation”)

Despite the global nature of FGC, many Western feminists have neglected to discuss genital cutting because of their fear of being labeled cultural imperialists. Pratibha Parmar identifies this fear in *Warrior Marks*. “The fear of being labeled cultural imperialists and racists has made many women reluctant to say or do anything about female genital mutilation . . . there has been a deafening silence, a refusal to engage either critically or actively with this taboo area of feminist concern” (Walker, *Warrior Marks* 94). By breaking the taboo surrounding female genital cutting, Walker challenges her reader to “feel *with* the people who are immersed in the suffering” (Walker, *Possessing* ix). She exposes the psychological and physical suffering of women who are genitally mutilated. In so doing, Walker criticizes the reluctance to speak out against gross violations of human rights. “This reluctance to *interfere with other cultures* leaves African children at risk of mutilation. If we do not speak out, we collude in the perpetuation of this violence. There is no virtue in upholding, even unwittingly, the tradition of female genital mutilation” (Walker, *Warrior Marks* 95). In her attempt to expose the violent nature of female genital mutilation, Walker breaks the silence surrounding the taboo and in so doing makes FGC a problem to be solved by women worldwide. She writes:

Clearly, female genital mutilation is a painful, complex, and difficult issue, which involves questions of cultural and national identities, sexuality, human rights, and the rights of women and girls to live safe and healthy lives. But this complexity is not an excuse to sit by and do nothing. Who cares if African women and children are subjected to violence? *We should all care.* (Walker, *Warrior Marks* 95)



This sentiment is shared by many other FGC activists who call upon women everywhere to end FGC. “As we work together we begin to rebuild the shattered ancient foundation of the universal family of women” (Walker, *Warrior Marks* 59). FGC is a human rights issue and therefore needs to be recognized as such by the international community in order to halt the practice worldwide. The fear of cultural imperialism can no longer be an excuse for not speaking out against the practice just as it cannot be used as an excuse to perpetuate FGC.

The sentiment to preserve tradition is also advocated in many communities around the globe today. FGC is presented as an antiquated custom that must continue in order to preserve cultural tradition. Thiam speaks against this presentation of FGC, stating that although preserving tradition is absolutely necessary, submission to customs like FGC is harmful and therefore must be stopped. She writes:

Capitulation on the part of Black Africans features in practically every field during the colonial period. But it was women in particular who took it upon themselves to preserve certain customs . . . It is because our mothers, our elders had the charge of children that they were—and remain—responsible for training them . . . and instilling in them a spirit of submission to customs . . . something had to be saved—that something which was indispensable to the preservation of the Black African as such . . . in this they succeeded by dint of insisting on maintaining ancestral practices. (Thiam 123)

Although women should be credited with the maintenance of important cultural traditions, Thiam criticizes their preservation of FGC as something necessary to Black African culture.

Many FGC activists and scholars have also identified the lack of education, particularly, the ignorance young girls have regarding the cultural practice of genital cutting, as one of the primary causes of perpetuation. Pratibha Parmar, the co-produce of the documentary *Warrior Marks*, identifies “one major contributing factor in the continuation of female genital mutilation . . . as the lack of educational resources being put into eradicating harmful traditions” (Walker, *Warrior Marks* 102). Julia Lalla-Maharajh, the founder and CEO of The Orchid Project, learned early on from Molly Melching of Tostan (a nongovernmental organization based in Senegal) that, “change is about communities. Communities are at their center. They are what matters . . . the change that is sweeping West Africa is being catalyzed by an extremely respectful and pragmatic approach, solidly based in human rights exploration and delivered through tangible applications of that learning” (Maharajh “Dancing to End Genital Cutting”). Education, thereby, is considered fundamental to halting FGC. Thiam identifies the lack of education as the primary means by which ignorance regarding these practices is perpetuated. The solution, she then claims, must come from “spreading information—but this information must come from women themselves. They themselves must break the curse of silence, for anthropologists and journalists have always been extremely discreet about this mutilation which they describe as an ‘initiation ceremony’ or a ‘picturesque custom” (Thiam 3). As more women begin to share their experiences publically, like

many have already done, others will begin to understand that mutilation is not necessary nor is it the status quo.

There are several important decisions that Walker makes in the plot of *Possessing the Secret of Joy* that allow her to highlight certain aspects of FGC. Firstly, Tashi is an adolescent when she undergoes her ritualistic circumcision. As the leaders of the Orchid Project note, “the age at which a girl is cut can vary according to where she lives. In some countries a girl may be cut during infancy, in others she may be 15 or even an adult” (The Orchid Project). Tashi’s sister is circumcised at a young age and bleeds to death from the procedure. “Underneath a tree, on the bare ground outside the hut, lay a dazed row of little girls though to me they seemed not so little. They were all a few years older than me. Dura’s age” (Walker, *Possessing* 73). Tashi is not forced to undergo the procedure like her sister because her mother, under missionary influence, converts to Christianity. She therefore, *chooses* to undergo the procedure as an adolescent:

The other women in the camp, according to M’Lissa, had all been initiated at the proper age. Either shortly after birth, or at the age of five or six, but certainly by the onset of puberty, ten or eleven. She had argued with Catherine, Tashi’s mother, to have the operation done for Tashi when she too was at the proper age. But, because Catherine had gone Christian, she’d turned a deaf ear to her. Now, M’Lissa said, with a grimace of justification, it was the grownup daughter who had come to her, wanting the operation because she recognized it as the only remaining definitive stamp of Olinka tradition. (Walker, *Possessing* 63)

Tashi's age is significant because as she undergoes therapy in the United States and Switzerland she begins to examine the reasons why she chose to be circumcised.

After years of therapy, Tashi identifies her motivation for undergoing the circumcision. The first reason relates to Hosken's "Conspiracy of Silence," (Hosken 315). which is intrinsically linked to female ignorance regarding the procedure. As Hosken states, "the politics of female genital mutilation (FGM) are positively linked to the politics of ignorance—of withholding from women and the young the vital information about how their bodies and reproduction function" (Hosken 316). Tashi, even as an older adolescent, is ignorant of the cause of her sister's death and subsequently of the functioning of her own sexual organs. "It was only after I came to America, I said, that I even knew what was supposed to be down there . . . my own body was a mystery to me, as was the female body, beyond the function of the breasts, to almost everyone I knew" (Walker, *Possessing* 119). Tashi is an adult when she arrives in the United States and yet was never educated about the functions of her body prior to her arrival.

Further, the nature of Dura's death is never explained to Tashi. This is significant because Tashi remains ignorant of the circumcision rite. In fact, all Tashi is told as a young girl is that, "one of Tashi's sisters had died. Her name was Dura, and she had bled to death. That was all Tashi had been told; all she knew" (Walker, *Possessing* 8). The other women in the village, especially Tashi's mother, are culpable for failing to educate Tashi and thereby protect her from the dangers, both psychological and physical, of genital cutting. As a result, Tashi is fearful of blood, thinking that any minor scratch may cause her to bleed to death much like her sister. Olivia remembers Tashi's childhood fear, stating, "If while we were playing, she pricked her finger on a thorn or scraped her knee

and glimpsed the sight of her own blood, she fell into a panic, until, gradually, she played in such a way as to take no risks and even learned to sew in an exaggeratedly careful way” (Walker, *Possessing* 8-9). Although Tashi’s entire childhood is crafted by the fear of blood and Dura’s death, she slowly begins to forget the memory of her sister. As an adult, Tashi begins to recall these repressed memories by analyzing her terrorizing nightmares. “But she forgot why the sight of her own blood terrified her . . . years later, in the United States, she would begin to remember some of the things she’d told me over the years of our growing up” (Walker, *Possessing* 9). As Tashi recalls these memories she begins to understand why the exact nature of Dura’s death was never explained.

Women are guilty of perpetuating the silence governing the circumcision rite and thereby allowing it to flourish. Like Tashi’s sister Dura, the young girls look forward to the rite as they begin receiving presents and special treatment weeks prior. Tashi remembers Dura, “very excited during the period leading up to her death. 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 . . . bright remnants of cloth for a headscarf and dress. The promise of shoes!” (Walker, *Possessing* 9). These gifts and preferential treatment foster excitement amongst the young girls who do not know what to expect upon their entrance into womanhood. Walker interviews a circumciser in *Warrior Marks* who notes, “everything is a secret, and ‘even if you put a knife to the girls who have been circumcised, they wouldn’t talk and tell you what is cut and how it is done’” (Walker, *Warrior Marks* 182). The fear of speaking out among women enables patriarchal society to perpetuate the ignorance that ensures female subjugation. That is why many African activists have identified the importance of having

someone break the taboo regarding FGC. Awa Thiam notes, “The Black women who express themselves here are not conscious of injustice and have not yet discovered solidarity and hope . . . the fact that they are beginning to speak out is a sign of their growing awareness. This awareness will deepen and broaden. But it was important for someone—in particular, a woman—to decide to lift the taboo to break the silence” (Thiam 2). Just as Tashi begins her strenuous journey to uncover forgotten memories and come to terms with her mutilation, other women have slowly begun to recognize that by speaking out against FGC they can ensure that their daughters do not suffer genital cutting.

Walker also examines the pressure of communal acceptance and the impact it has on the occurrences of FGC. Tashi tells Raye, “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” (Walker, *Possessing* 120). The pressure that stems from other members of the Olinka community drives Tashi to undergo circumcision. Tashi, uneducated about the risks and pain, only desires to have the circumcision so that she will be deemed a suitable Olinka maiden. Hosken identifies conformity as another driving force that perpetuates FGC. “Although genital mutilation occurs in London, Paris, and the US, it is in Africa (and parts of Asia) that it is so routine that a woman is, in many cultures, considered a monster if she is not ‘circumcised’” (Walker, *Warrior Marks* 80). Fearful of being labeled a monster and therefore unsuitable for marriage, Tashi undergoes the circumcision rite. Thiam writes:

However much a little girl may want to be excised because all the other girls of her own age have been done, or because she has been persuaded that it is the right

thing to have done, this does not mean that she doesn't suffer excruciating pain. Similarly, she feels that violence is being done to her body; she is conscious of suffering a physical injury, of being maimed in some way. (Thiam 69)

By choosing to be circumcised Tashi relinquishes the 'taboo' sexual pleasure she once experienced with Adam in the fields as a young girl for tribal acceptance. Raye asks Tashi why she:

Willingly gave this [sexual pleasure] up in order to . . . I completed the sentence for her: to be accepted as a real woman by the Olinka people; to stop the jeering. Otherwise I was a thing. Worse, because of my friendship with Adam's family and my special relationship to him, I was never trusted, considered a potential traitor, even. (Walker, *Possessing* 120)

Tashi does not want to be an outsider to her Olinka heritage. For this reason, she chooses to undergo the circumcision rite. Tashi believes that her circumcision will demonstrate her allegiance to her culture and tribe.

Cultural imperialism also affects Tashi's decision to be circumcised because she feels a responsibility to preserve tribal traditions. Tashi does not only seek acceptance, but also desires to maintain unique tribal customs. The Olinka tribe has missionaries, like Adam, living in their village. Because of the missionary presence many Olinkans, like Tashi's mother, converted to Christianity. The missionaries pose a threat to the existence of the Olinka tribe. In the last form of resistance, Tashi feels she must be circumcised in order to preserve tribal custom. The Olinka Leader, currently in jail for leading the resistance movement, constantly reminds his people to maintain tribal culture. Tashi

hears this as a direct and personal call for circumcision. “Our Leader had died for us. For our independence. For our freedom. What could I possibly say about my insignificant life in the face of that reality?” (Walker, *Possessing* 114). Tashi must follow the instructions of the Leader to uphold Olinka tradition and preserve cultural uniqueness. She explains this to her psychiatrist Raye:

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 still be around during our children’s and our children’s children’s time . . . that we must return to the purity of our own culture and traditions. That we must not neglect our ancient customs . . . we must keep ourselves clean and pure as we had been since time immemorial—by cutting out unclean parts of our body. (Walker, *Possessing* 115-119)

Walker highlights the desire to preserve tradition through Tashi’s *choice* to be circumcised. With missionaries encroaching on village customs, Tashi seeks to preserve what is uniquely Olinkan. She, therefore, hears her Leader’s message as a direct call to be circumcised (something she feels guilty for not having already done).

Along with the desire to gain acceptance and maintain tradition, Tashi also wishes to appeal to the dominant patriarchy in Olinka society. Raye presses Tashi to explain why she needed the circumcision if Adam, the man she loved, already accepted her without it, to which Tashi responds, “I smiled at the young innocent, ignorant girl I’d been . . . like



every Olinka maiden, I said, I was in love with the perfect lover who already had three wives” (Walker, *Possessing* 121). Although Tashi loves Adam and shares a special bond with his missionary family, she, like all Olinka women, has been raised to desire their Leader, or any Olinka man emulating him. “Poor Adam! He couldn’t hold a candle to our Leader, the real—to us—Jesus Christ” (Walker, *Possessing* 121). In Walker’s visit to the Gambia she identifies this submission to tradition. “I think genital mutilation plays a role. The early submission by force that is the hallmark of mutilation. The feeling of being overpowered and thoroughly dominated by those you are duty bound to respect” (Walker, *Warrior Marks* 69). Tashi’s Leader is the “great liberator” (Walker, *Possessing* 120) of their tribe, the head of the dominant patriarchy. Gaining his acceptance, along with the acceptance of all village men, cannot be done without being circumcised. Tashi accepts this reality and makes the choice to be circumcised in order to be suitable to Olinka men. Tashi’s acceptance is inherently an acknowledgement of the dominant patriarchy. Walker notes, “I can’t help but connect this behavior to genital mutilation: the acceptance of domination, the lack of a strong sense of self one sees among women here” (Walker, *Warrior Marks* 53-54). This lack of selfhood leads Tashi to M’Lissa, the circumciser, so that she can gain the acceptance of the Olinka tribe.

Honor is also fundamental to the continued practice of circumcision. The husband must penetrate his wife and break through the scars of her circumcision to ensure her virginity and purity. Thiam, of her study in Somalia writes, “infibulation in this country [Somalia] is ‘an absolute guarantee that the girl has not been touched, a guarantee that the parents give on her value as merchandise” (Thiam 70). Similarly, Nawal El Saadawi, one

of the first women in the Arab world to speak of her circumcision, views premarital virginity as one of the demands of patriarchal society. She writes:

This is due to the fact that patriarchal class society has imposed premarital virginity on girls and ensured that the very honour of a girl, and her family, is closely linked to the preservation of this virginity. If virginity is lost, this brings almost everlasting shame which can only be ‘wiped out in blood,’ as the common Arab saying goes. Virginity is a strict moral rule which applies to girls alone. Yet one would think that the first criterion of a moral rule, if it is indeed to be moral, should be that it applies to all without exception, and does not yield to any form of discrimination whether on the basis of sex, colour or class. (Saadawi 41)

Because Walker emphasizes the sexual pleasure Tashi was once able to receive before her circumcision, she does not address Tashi’s circumcision specifically as a means to uphold honor.<sup>5</sup> She does, however, discuss the issue of honor in *Warrior Marks*. Walker watches the sacrifice of the chicken along with the ceremonial dancing performed before the circumcision and ponders the role of the circumciser who has the, “‘crown of authority . . . how ancient is this ‘crown’ I wondered, and does it bear any relationship to the wedding finger and wedding band? I wondered this because the primary purpose of circumcision is to make the girls marriageable” (Walker, *Warrior Marks* 46). After

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<sup>5</sup> Unbeknownst to the tribe, Tashi and Adam escape to the fields and engage in sexual acts. “In Olinka society the strongest taboo was against making love in the fields. So strong was this taboo that no one in living memory had broken it. And yet, we did . . . 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 tongue bringing us no babies, and to both of us delight. This way of loving, among her people, the greatest taboo of all.” (Walker, *Possessing* 27).

circumcision, a girl is officially viewed as a marriageable and pure. “A girl cannot be considered to have reached full ‘womanhood’ until she has undergone excision. Since excision is thought of as the purification of the feminine element, it implies the idea of perfectibility in the adult” (Thiam 69). In *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, honor, although not attached to marriage, is fundamental to the way Tashi views herself. “Tashi is unable to conceive herself ‘honorable’ until she is acceptable to Olinka society, which she can only achieve through circumcision. Tashi views honor as the maintenance of her ethnic identity, despite colonial and missionary influences. For this reason, she views circumcision as an honorable way to uphold tribal customs.

Walker introduces the history of subjugation of women through examples in *Warrior Marks* that extend from FGC to footbinding and other cultural practices that harm women. In *Possessing the Secret of Joy* she identifies these historic examples through a mythical tale of creationism. Saadawi writes: “The situations and problems of women in contemporary human society are born of developments in history that made one class rule over another, and men dominate over women. They are the product of class and sex” (Saadawi xi). Walker extends this historic discussion to her tale of creation in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. Pierre, Adam’s son with Lisette<sup>6</sup>, reads Tashi the anthropological history of the Dogon people, a tribe from Mali, who Walker attributes

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<sup>6</sup> Lisette is a French woman who Adam first meets as a young boy in Africa. He subsequently visits her in Paris. As an adult he has an ongoing affair with Lisette that Tashi knows of. Lisette is representative of all of the liberty Tashi does not possess, never even marrying so as not to fall prey to patriarchal tendencies. Her Uncle Carl (Mzee) invites Tashi to his home to help her heal. Eventually, Lisette conceives Pierre. When Lisette gets sick and dies, Pierre comes to live with Tashi and Adam in the US. He and Tashi develop a close bond as he knew her story from childhood and often wondered about her.

with beginning the practice of circumcision. “The God Amma . . . took a lump of clay, squeezed it in his hand and flung it from him . . . the clay spread and fell on the north, which is the top, and from there stretched out to the south, which is the bottom, of the world . . . it extends east and west with separate members like a foetus in the womb” (Walker, *Possessing* 169). This is how the earth came to be. The earth, however, in Pierre’s tale is a woman, the God Amma, a man.

It is a body, that is to say, a thing with members branching out from a central mass. This body, lying flat, face upwards, in a line from north to south, is feminine. Its sexual organ is an anthill, and its clitoris a termite hill. Amma, being lonely and desirous of intercourse with this creature, approached it. That was the occasion of the first breach of the order of the universe. (Walker, *Possessing* 169)

Walker identifies Amma’s attempt to have intercourse with the earth as the first breach of order of the universe, the very first example of masculinity attempting to assert itself over femininity, which would change the course of things forever. “At God’s approach the termite hill rose up, barring the passage and displaying its masculinity. It was as strong as the organ of the stranger, and intercourse could not take place. But God is all-powerful. He cut down the termite hill, and had intercourse with the excised earth” (Walker, *Possessing* 160). Amma rose against earth and used his power to excise the clitoris, which was barring him from having intercourse.

Pierre continues the story of creation, reaching the example of footbinding in the present day, to demonstrate to Tashi that women all over the world have fallen prey to patriarchal desires. He states:

My mother used to say genital mutilation, which predates all the major religions, was a kind of footbinding. She is gazing at a drawing of a tiny, putrid, Chinese woman's foot, and reading the notation that says 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. This immobility most satisfying to his lust. The pain of her hobbling attempts to escape pure incentive to relish the chase. (Walker, *Possessing* 172)

Walker marks the advent of patriarchal dominance with the story of creation. She concludes that women are still subject to male preference and passion, forced to satisfy the desires of men often at their own physical expense. Walker's relates these forms of mutilation because she desires to create a female global movement to end such practices. She strives, in *Possessing the Secret of Joy* to show the ways in which women in different cultures and communities are subject to patriarchal preference. Walker, in a magazine statement, wrote:

This novel was quite horrific to write, and I knew that writing it would change me profoundly as I encountered this reality that has so much to do with devaluation of women and how women are so completely dominated by men. In this country we are far from being completely separated from the practice of mutilating. Here the beautiful people are routinely having their breasts enlarged or their noses rearranged. I'd really like readers to see the connection between genital mutilation and the mutilation of the rest of the body. The aim is the same: to please the man, in a culture that tries so hard to give men what they want. (Alice Walker Papers, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University)

By identifying FGC as a form of pleasing the dominant patriarchy, Walker is able to make connections to the similar ways women in other cultures attempt to appeal to men. Most cultures, she concludes, are guilty of conforming to patriarchal desire in some form, whether it is through physical transformations or engrained psychological beliefs regarding the role of the female within society.

This patriarchy permeates communities and dictates female action all over the world. Hosken identifies the ‘politics’ of FGC as a large-scale replication of the hierarchal family unit:

The politics of genital mutilation are first of all the patriarchal politics of controlling production and reproduction of the wholly-owned female labor force . . . they are the sexual politics designed to affirm the power of males over female sexuality and reproduction. The patriarchal family structure—a worldwide institution maintained and enforced by all man-made governments and organized religions—serves that goal. (Hosken 315)

Similarly, Awa Thiam notes, “the status of woman could end the oppression and monstrous exploitation endured by women . . . strength will reside solely in the multitude of voices, of people, of consciences resolved to effect a radical change in all the present decadent social structures. There is no other way” (Thiam 85). Many campaigners against FGC fight for its abolition for health reasons rather than get involved in the feminist dialogue, which is intrinsically linked to the fight to end FGC. Walker, Hosken, and Thiam are revolutionary because they all make this link. Walker writes of Thiam, “Her perspective is radical, and she links female genital mutilation to patriarchal control and

violence against women and doesn't see it as just a health issue" (Walker, *Warrior Marks* 126). By uncovering the societal elements that enable FGC and perpetuate it, these women are attempting to terminate the patriarchal influences that shape female action.

Many other FGC activists have sought to connect the struggle of women who succumb to mutilation practices to that of the domination of women worldwide. Saadawi writes, "Now we know what it is. Now we know where lies our tragedy. We are born of a special sex, the female sex. We are destined in advance to taste of misery, and to have a part of our body torn away by cold, unfeeling cruel hands" (Saadawi 15). She attributes the tragedy of FGC to being born a female, not being born an Arabic woman or a Black woman, but rather, to simply being a woman. "The oppression of women, the exploitation and social pressures to which they are exposed, are not characteristic of Arab or Middle Eastern societies, or countries of the 'Third World' alone. They constitute an integral part of the political, economic and cultural system preponderant in most of the world" (Saadawi xxxiv). Implicit in fighting this dominant force, Thiam writes, is that, "in order to win independence, one must first be conscious of one's dependence" (Thiam 2). Both women recognize the social pressure that exists for women living in a world dominated by men. Walker acknowledges this pressure in *Possessing the Secret of Joy* through Pierre. He states, "At last, I recognized the connection between mutilation and enslavement that is at the root of the domination of women in the world" (Walker, *Possessing* 137). In order to fight this exploitation, however, women must first recognize this structural dependence and stop trying to appease men by conforming to the desires of patriarchal society.

Although FGC still occurs all over the world, more women are beginning to speak out against the practice. Awa Thiam interviews many women who are willing to discuss their own personal experiences with circumcision. Similarly, Nawal El Saadawi and Mende Nazer have published books that describe their own circumcision rite as well as that of their communities. In Alice Walker's portrayal of Tashi's circumcision she analyzes many of the complex influences that perpetuate circumcision. These influences include the desire to be accepted and considered a woman in society, to be deemed honorable, and to preserve cultural tradition, especially with the impending threat of colonialism. Tashi, while influenced by all of these factors, is overwhelmingly influenced by the desire of her Olinka Leader and the demands of patriarchal society, which Walker identifies as dating back to the story of creation and 'the first breach of order of the universe' (Walker, *Possessing*). Tashi believes she is upholding her tradition and defying the missionary threat when she chooses to be circumcised. Women have been praised for being the 'keepers of tradition.' Awa Thiam recognizes and praises women for upholding certain cultural practices that make each individual culture unique. Hosken, like Thiam, sees this praise as detrimental in relation to FGC. She writes:

The 'culture and tradition' label is so often used that it must be analyzed. Why are women singled out as 'keepers of tradition?' Tradition is stressed when it comes to keeping women 'in their place'—in Africa and all over the world—that is, without education or resources, dependent, ignorant, illiterate, and isolated . . . culture, custom and tradition: why are they made out to be beneficial for women, when mostly just the opposite is true? (Hosken 10)



Hosken asserts that tradition is something women should be weary of. In the case of FGC it has provided the excuse for the mutilation of millions of women. Walker criticizes the role that dominant patriarchy has played in perpetuating the lie of cultural preservation and in so doing joins herself with many of the greatest FGC activists who have sought to define genital mutilation in patriarchal terms.

### Chapter Three: Debunking the Myth: The Imperfect Mother

“For many years now, I have studied, have thought about, the mother who collaborates with the destroyer of daughters. The mother who betrays” (Walker, *Warrior Marks* 21).

In *Possessing the Secret of Joy* Walker is critical of the role women play in perpetuating female genital cutting (FGC). Central to this criticism, is the idealization of the mother figure, which Walker seeks to undo in the novel. In many communities where FGC is common, the idealization of the mother figure extends to communal mothers as well; young girls are taught to revere and respect elders, in particular, the female circumciser (Walker, *Warrior Marks*). Walker presents two relationships that are fundamental to shaping the reader’s perception of women and in particular mothers in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. The first is the relationship Tashi has with her own mother, whom she envisions as possessing a fierce strength. As an adult, Tashi realizes this strength was simply the will to endure and socialize Tashi and her sister into women in patriarchal society. The second is the subsequent relationship Tashi develops with her son Benny. Their relationship is complicated by Tashi’s associations with patriarchal society and is therefore full of pain and suffering for both parent and child. Many other women who have written about FGC, particularly those who recount their own circumcision experiences, are highly critical of the role of their mothers not only during the circumcision but also in perpetuating their daughters’ ignorance beforehand. In their book *Mother Daughter Revolution: From Betrayal to Power* Elizabeth Debold, Marie Wilson and Idelisse Malave discuss how mothers fail their daughters for fear of nonconformance to the dominant patriarchy. These women discuss the potential power of the mother daughter relationship and ways in which it can be revolutionized. Walker presents

lackluster mothers, such as the ones Debold, Wilson and Malave introduce, who fail to protect their children. In her depiction, Walker undoes the idealization of the 'mother figure' as it is often conveyed today.

Women are instrumental in perpetuating FGC and continuing the tradition of the circumcision rite. Mothers, in particular, play an extremely important role in misguiding their own daughters and keeping young girls ignorant about FGC. Awa Thiam's research conducted in Somalia led her to conclude that: "as far as this country is concerned, excision and infibulation are certainly not considered as mutilatory practices. On the contrary, they are insisted on, even today, by all Somali women, from the eldest to the youngest, partly in response to what they see as the relaxation of traditional morals" (Thiam 73). Shulamith Firestone wrote, in her text *The Dialectic of Sex*, "that a basic mother/child interdependency has existed in some form in every society, past or present, and thus has shaped the psychology of every mature female and every infant" (Firestone 9). This interdependency has shaped the beliefs of women in society. Women insist on the mutilation of other women, largely because of what they have been taught by elder women. In doing so, they conform to the demands of patriarchal society rather than defend their daughters and granddaughters by fighting to halt the practice.

In fact, one of the women Thiam interviews speaks of her decision not to circumcise her own daughters. Her mother, however, did not accept this choice. One day when she was returning home from work she found her daughters lying on mats on the ground. "I heard my mother saying, 'Just see you don't disturb *my* grandchildren. They were excised and infibulated this morning.' I can't tell you what my feelings were at that precise moment. What could I do or say against my mother? I felt a surge of rebellion but

I was powerless in the face of my mother” (Thiam 64). This feeling of powerlessness stems from the fact that all young girls are taught to obey and trust their mothers. By neglecting the wishes of her daughter, this mother betrayed her trust. She asserted her right as matriarch of the family and in doing so ignored her daughter’s wishes. “Like many African women, my mother had just proved that she had rights not only over me, but also over my children—*her* grandchildren” (Thiam 64). The feeling of powerlessness contributes to the communal female compliance regarding FGC. Women do not feel empowered to change the status quo and therefore instruct their daughters to survive and passively comply to the tradition as their elders once did. This type of maternal hierarchy exists in many African communities; in Mali this behavior, according to the interviewee is quite common amongst grandmothers who strive to preserve the circumcision custom.

Many women who have written openly about their own circumcision detail the role of their mothers during the procedure. Mende Nazer, in *Slave: My True Story* describes her own circumcision experience and outlines the role her mother had in ‘tricking’ her.

One day, my mother told me that I was to be circumcised. In our tradition, circumcision marks the transition from childhood to adulthood . . . she showed me where they would cut my genitals and sew me up again, leaving only a tiny hole . . . my mother told me. ‘Don’t worry. I’ll make sure the woman does it especially gently for you.’ (Nazer 78-79)

Prior to this explanation from her mother, Mende was ignorant regarding the customary ritual. Because of her ignorance, she could not understand why her older sister sobbed

after her wedding night, which she thought was supposed to be the happiest day of her sister's life, nor could Mende understand why, "there was a large, red stain halfway down it [the ritual wedding sheet], which looked to me like blood" (Nazer 42). Mende's sister's scars are broken after her wedding ceremony. In Nuba tradition the husband penetrates his wife and the sheet is hung over the door for the village to see the following day. Despite not understanding her sister's pain, Mende is told of the circumcision ritual before she is of age. Her mother discloses (albeit false) information regarding the circumcision thereby ending Mende's childhood ignorance.

Mende's mother misguides her daughter out of fear for what will happen if her daughter is uncircumcised and therefore unacceptable to the men of the village. This fear is induced by patriarchal society. As Jomo Kenyatta writes of his Gikuyu tribe in Kenya, "No proper Gikuyu would dream of marrying a girl who has not been circumcised" (Kenyatta 132). Mende recalls the day of her circumcision stating:

The woman sat me down on a small wooden stool, and pushed my legs apart as far as they would go . . . I was crying and kicking and trying to fight free. The pain was worse than anything I could ever have imagined . . . but my sisters and my mother held me down and forced my legs apart, so the woman could continue cutting away. 'I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry.' My mother mouthed at me silently, with tears in her eyes. (Nazer 79)

This moment results in the greatest betrayal between mother and daughter. Mende remarks, "Suddenly, I realized that my mother had tricked me. I couldn't believe that she could be so cruel" (Nazer 23). Mende's mother recognizes the betrayal of her daughter's

trust but is unable to resist the demands of society and change the status quo regarding circumcision in their Nuba village. Firestone identifies matriarchy as “a stage on the way to patriarchy, to man’s fullest realization of himself” (Firestone 83). Firestone calls into question the entire concept of matriarchy, claiming it is merely an institution created by patriarchal society. Women, like Mende’s mother, who attempt to fulfill their motherly duties thereby act as cohorts with patriarchal society.

Similarly, Nawal El Saadawi recounts her circumcision, a night that as an adult she still remembers in full despite being only six when it occurred. “I was six years old that night when I lay in my bed, warm and peaceful . . . I felt something move under the blankets, something like a huge hand, cold and rough, fumbling over my body . . . almost simultaneously another hand, as cold and as rough . . . was clapped over my mouth, to prevent me from screaming” (Saadawi 13). Her first thought, as a young girl, was to call out for her mother to end this torment. Saadawi recalls her shock when she discovered that her mother was standing right by her side:

I did not know what they had cut off from my body and I did not try to find out. I just wept, and called out to my mother for help. But the worst shock of all was when I looked around and found her standing by my side. Yes, it was her, I could not be mistaken, in flesh and blood, right in the midst of these strangers, talking to them and smiling at them, as though they had not participated in slaughtering her daughter just a few moments ago. (Saadawi 14)

This betrayal resulted in the end of Saadawi’s childhood at the mere age of six. The acknowledgement that her mother not only had failed to protect her but also had

participated in her mutilation was the welcome Saadawi received into adulthood and patriarchal society.

In Mende's case, she is able to perceive the true nature of her mother's betrayal. "I remember thinking vaguely, 'My mother promised me that it wouldn't hurt. She lied to me. She lied to me. She lied to me'" (Nazer 80). Many women, however, are never able to recognize their mother's deceit as clearly, even in the case of FGC. As a child, Tashi is unable to find fault with her mother for her sister Dura's death or her own eventual circumcision. She recognizes only her mother's strength. "I have never seen anyone work as hard as my mother, or pull her share of the work with a more resigned dignity. Tashi, she would say, it is only hard work that fills the emptiness. But I had not previously understood her" (Walker, *Possessing* 16). Tashi confuses her mother's simple will to endure in the status quo as strength:

I watched the backs of her legs and noted how they sometimes quivered with the effort to ascend a steep hill . . . I studied the white rinds of my mother's heels, and felt in my own heart the weight of Dura's death settling upon her spirit . . . But my mother never wept, though like the rest of the women, when called upon to salute the power of the chief and his counselors she could let out a cry that assaulted the very heavens with its praising pain. (Walker, *Possessing* 16-17)

Tashi succumbs, like many young girls, to idealizing her mother. Following this analysis of her mother, in a moment of comedic relief, Walker flashes forward to Tashi's first experience undergoing psychoanalysis. The doctor says to Tashi that, "Negro women . . . can never be analyzed effectively because they can never bring themselves to blame their

mother” (Walker, *Possessing* 18). At first Tashi is taken aback. She thinks, “Since I was not a Negro woman I hesitated before hazarding an answer. I felt negated by the realization that even my psychiatrist could not see I was African” (Walker, *Possessing* 18). Although she does not answer his question, Tashi begins to think of the ways in which she idealized her own mother. Her memories guide her back to a fight with Olivia<sup>7</sup> and to the betrayal of her true self at the behest of her Leader and elders to preserve her tribe.

I used to think my mother thought about me. But I identified with her suffering so completely it was I who always thought about, indeed was haunted by, her suffering; and because I believed she and I were one I made the part of her that was me think about me. In truth, my mother was not equipped, there was not enough of her self left to her, to think about me. Or about my sister Dura.

(Walker, *Possessing* 272)

Because of her suffering, Tashi’s mother is never able to adequately protect her own daughters. Tashi is only able to realize her mother’s failings as an adult looking back on her childhood. Tashi’s mother’s greatest betrayal, however, is allowing her daughters to succumb to the circumcision rite that still tortures her even as an adult.

Other esteemed figures in Tashi’s life fail to protect her. For example, Tashi is misguided by the elders in her society, in particular, by the messages of her idealized Leader and M’Lissa the circumciser. Tashi has been taught that she is doing something

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<sup>7</sup> Olivia is Adam’s sister and Tashi’s sister-in-law. She grows up in the Olinka community with her missionary family. Her and Tashi quickly become best friends. This friendship continues from childhood until Tashi’s death.



wrong when her and Adam meet in the fields. The Olinka belief system has engrained in its youth that this form of love is taboo. Adam, as a young man, reflects on this taboo, stating, “My tongue bringing us no babies, and to both of us delight. This way of loving, among her people, the greatest taboo of all . . . was it a pleasure of which others knew? . . . The faces of our elders in the village bore no hint of it” (Walker, *Possessing* 28).

When Tashi’s tribe is threatened and her Leader sends messages to his people from jail to “remember who we were . . . return to the purity of our own culture and traditions,” (Walker, *Possessing* 115) Tashi feels she must once again obey the wishes of her elders and align herself with her tribe by undergoing the one ritual she has not yet undergone: the circumcision rite, of which she is completely ignorant.

Tashi is perceived as an outsider to her tribe because of her friendship with Adam and Olivia’s family. In order to align herself with her tribe Tashi feels she must undergo tribal customs such as the circumcision rite and facial scarring. Olivia pleads with Tashi, who rejects her cries yelling, “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. I spat on the ground. It was an expression of contempt only very old Olinkans had known how to use to full effect . . . I turned my back on the sister of my heart, and rushed away from her stricken face” (Walker, *Possessing* 23-24). Tashi is burdened by the demands of her elders and therefore relinquishes the bond to those she truly holds dear in order to meet the demands of her elders, particularly of her Leader; the head of the patriarchy. Tashi’s anger and guilt drive her to submit to the circumcision and refuse Olivia’s pleas. Moreover, Tashi believes she is acting to preserve tribal customs by undergoing this final act of defiance. Ironically, she envisions herself a warrior when she chooses to submit to

the ritual cutting. Unfortunately, the procedure undoes any of Tashi's fierce qualities and replaces them with a wounded and passive adult.

As a young child, Tashi does not feel the burden to appease patriarchal society. Rather, she is angry with the women who ask her to forget her sister on the day of her death. Tashi's boldness and nonconformity corresponds with the analysis of Debold, Malave and Wilson, who assert that young girls retain their boldness and ferocity as they have not yet been exposed to patriarchal influences and will not be aware of its existence until adolescence. "While younger girls are strong, outspoken, and clear about themselves, at the edge of adolescence they begin taking in what they are told about how girls *should* be and come to see how women are treated in this society" (Debold, Wilson, and Malave xiv). Tashi is in disbelief when the elderly women ask her to stop crying and forget about her sister's death to welcome the incoming missionaries:

They were always saying *You mustn't cry!* These are new people coming to live among us, and to meet them in tears is to bring bad luck to us. They'll think we beat you! Yes, we understand your sister is dead, but . . . time now to put on a good face . . . how could I believe these were the same women I'd known all my life? The same women who'd known Dura? And whom Dura had known? She'd gone to buy matches or snuff for them nearly every day. She'd carried their water jugs on her head. It was a nightmare. Suddenly it was not acceptable to speak of my sister. Or to cry for her. (Walker, *Possessing* 15)

Tashi begins to learn from a young age that the women she has grown up respecting and caring for are more concerned with Tashi behaving as she is expected than they are for

her grief. Nawal El Saadawi comments that a young girl's education is a slow process of annihilation. As Tashi recounts her transformation into adolescence and adulthood, the change in her attitude, namely her compliance, becomes clear. "Education of female children is therefore transformed into a slow process of annihilation, a gradual throttling of her personality and mind, leaving intact only the outside shell, the body, a lifeless mould of muscle and bone and blood that moves like a wound-up rubber doll" (Saadawi 22). Tashi is exemplary of this kind of education. She transforms from a bold youth into a wounded and unassertive adult.

Mothers strive to teach their daughters how to live within the confines of patriarchal society to ensure their survival, but in doing so force their daughters to abandon the outspokenness and honesty that defines them as youths. "They (girls) are put in the impossible dilemma of giving up what they know and feel to keep from being abandoned or excluded by their mothers and the other women closest to them" (Debold, Wilson, and Malave 43). Wishing to appease their mothers, girls decide to give up what they know to enter the patriarchal world which they recognize as denying women power. "Girls firsthand gain an extraordinarily political knowledge about men and women by observing how women are denied power in patriarchal culture" (Debold, Wilson, and Malave 45). Debold, Wilson and Malave argue that as a girl enters adolescence the role of women in patriarchal society becomes clear to her. "The dawning realization of women's subordinate position within the culture becomes more and more clear to them [adolescent girls]" (Debold, Wilson, and Malave 44). Even at a young age, girls understand the price of admittance into patriarchal society. "They lose some aspect of themselves as the price of admission to civilized adult society . . . Like prisoners of war,

girls are captive in a culture where men are dominant” (Debold, Wilson, and Malave 48-49). The price of Tashi’s admittance into the adult world is her circumcision. But whether a physical or psychological wound all women are prescribed a subordinate role within society; a role that they are taught to adhere by their own mothers.

In the case of FGC, mothers lie to their daughters so that they will not know the pain of circumcision and so that ultimately they will be considered acceptable and marriageable to men. Kenyatta writes, “they [women] are made to promise never to reveal the tribal secrets, even to a member of the tribe who has not yet been initiated” (Kenyatta 141). Mende, as an adult, sees that her parents circumcised her out of fear. “They feared that if I wasn’t circumcised, I would never be married . . . my parents really, truly believed that they were doing the best for me” (Nazer 83). Parents fail to recognize the choices they can make to protect their own daughters. Instead, they prescribe to the cultural customs that will allow their daughter to be considered acceptable and thereby flourish within society. Amy, one of Raye’s patients, notes, “I was to be controlled all my life, she said, by my mother’s invisible hand. And it *was* invisible, she cried, striking the arm of her chair with a clenched fist” (Walker, *Possessing* 187). In the interviews Walker conducts throughout Africa she describes mothers who will have their daughters circumcised at all costs. “Throughout Africa, one can see mothers who barely have enough to eat spending . . . all their money to have a child mutilated and thus made ‘attractive and marriageable’” (Walker, *Warrior Marks* 14). Mothers who choose to circumcise their daughters do so because they are afraid to acknowledge any alternative lifestyle that would involve overthrowing the dominant patriarchy.

Walker attributes this fear to women of all cultures recalling her own blinding wound as a child. “After the birth of my own daughter, I confronted my mother . . . my mother asked me to forgive her . . . what I had, I realized only as a consciously feminist adult, was a patriarchal wound” (Walker, *Warrior Marks* 17). Walker refers to her wound as such because it was the ideals of patriarchal society that governed all of the decision-making in purchasing her brother’s gun, which would blind her and leave her with her warrior mark. Mothers who prescribe to the demands of patriarchal society do so because they cannot view an alternative lifestyle for their daughters. Such mothers truly believe that by circumcising their daughters they are giving them the chance to thrive in patriarchal society, despite the psychological and physical pain that will remain.

As an adult, Tashi returns to see M’Lissa and ultimately to kill her. Beforehand, however, she spends time with M’Lissa and begins to learn the story of the *tsunga* (circumciser). M’Lissa reveals her own story of how since the beginning of time women in her family have always been *tsungas*. She describes a past where women were the leaders of the tribe and heads of the family. This changed and gradually, she states, “this was seen as evil,” (Walker, *Possessing* 212) therefore, men became the heads of households. She remembers her own mother as “a sad woman . . . I never saw her smile” (Walker, *Possessing* 212). When her mother was forced to circumcise her daughter, M’Lissa, she tried to spare her some of the pain, the male witchdoctor took over and “showed no mercy” (Walker, *Possessing* 214). M’Lissa was never able to recover fully. “I could never again see myself, for the child that finally rose from the mat three months later, and dragged herself out of the initiation hut and finally home, was not the child who had been taken there. I was never to see that child again” (Walker, *Possessing* 215).

Although the circumciser undergoes a horrific cutting experience and recognizes the sadness in her own mother, M'Lissa continues to inflict the same pain on hundreds of young girls because the male leaders of the tribe demanded it. Tashi realizes as an adult that, "the *tsunga* was to the traditional elders merely a witch they could control, an extension of their own dominating power" (Walker, *Possessing* 274). Tashi, similarly, when she is told by M'Lissa that her legs are finally unbound, realizes that, "her own proud walk had become a shuffle" (Walker, *Possessing* 64). Walker's Olinka community demonstrates the cyclical betrayal of women failing to protect their daughters and youth. In the cases presented in *Possessing the Secret of Joy* and *Warrior Marks* each woman is forced to undergo the circumcision ritual without any knowledge of what it truly is beyond 'a rite of passage' and ignorant to the pain that will remain with them forever.

Walker exposes the reader to M'Lissa's thoughts to reveal the ignorance that persists among the Olinka women. Even the circumciser, in charge of mutilating all of the young village girls, does not believe that she is anything more than a torturer, inflicting pain on children. "I have been strong . . . in service to tradition, to what makes us a people. In service to the country and what makes us who we are. But who are we but torturers of children?" (Walker, *Possessing* 219). M'Lissa remarks on the change that occurs when a child leaves the circumcision hut, that innocence and fierceness never to be seen again. She sees it in Tashi only when Tashi comes to murder her. "I finally see her, she says, astonished . . . who? I ask. You finally see who? . . . the child who went into the initiation hut, she says. You know I left her there bleeding on the floor, and I came out. She was crying. She felt so betrayed. By everyone" (Walker, *Possessing* 218). Tashi is never able to recover her true spirit, but in the face of death, M'Lissa recognizes

some of the ferocity and independence that Olinka children possess. Even Adam, an outsider to the Olinka tribe, recognizes the dishonesty perpetuated towards children. He states:

They do not want to hear what their children suffer. They've made the telling of the suffering itself taboo . . . are they saying something is 'sacred' and therefore not to be publicly examined for fear of disturbing the mystery; or are they saying it is so profane it must not be exposed, for fear of corrupting the young? (Walker, *Possessing* 161)

Adam recognizes the silence governing the circumcision rite. He explains that even the suffering associated with the procedure is viewed as taboo. He is indicting the elders, in particular, the tribal women, for failing to examine the tradition and expose the ritual to their children.

Tashi's mother, much like Mende's, perpetuates the dominance of patriarchal society by failing to reveal any of her own hardships to her daughter, whom she knows will be forced to undergo similar suffering. Tashi's mother not only fails to explain Dura's death<sup>8</sup> but also refuses to answer any of Tashi's questions regarding her birth. "I did not carry you to term, she has told me because I was scared of a leopard . . . and was I an easy birth? But she will only look over my head, to the side of my ear. Of course, she murmurs. Of course you were" (Walker, *Possessing* 19). Because Tashi's mother is circumcised, the reader can glean the lie she tells her daughter by saying she was an easy birth. She further distracts Tashi by immediately following the story of her birth with the

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<sup>8</sup> Dura is Tashi's "favorite sister" (Walker, *Possessing* 9). She dies outside the initiation hut from excessive bleeding after undergoing the circumcision ritual.

story of the leopard that scared her so that Tashi's imagination will be sparked and she will not inquire further into her birth.

An act of lying such as the lie Tashi is told by her mother is a prime example of what Wilson, Malave and Debold define as 'the mother's betrayal' (Debold, Wilson, and Malave). They identify the relationship between girls and women as essential to a girl's transformation into adolescence. "Girls' relationships with women, particularly their mothers, are key to their ability to resist self-negating changes and to thrive" (Debold, Wilson, and Malave xv). By answering Tashi the way she does or by Mende's mother lying to her about the pain involved in circumcision, these women, Debold Wilson and Malave argue, collude with patriarchal society and recognize their role in doing so. "We wanted to suggest that mothers recognize the role that they have been asked to play as conduits and, thus, perpetrators of the dominant culture. We wanted to help them see in a new way that mothers *can* transmit a different culture –heritage more than history" (Debold, Wilson, and Malave xvi). They further suggest that mothers are not simply just aware of the role they have been prescribed by dominant patriarchal society but also that they recognize that they are "just expected to teach daughters the deadening skills needed to fit well in patriarchal society" (Debold, Wilson, and Malave 23). Because of this, "good' mothering, as it now exists for mothers and daughters, guarantees that a daughter is abandoned by the woman closest to her at the door to patriarchy" (Debold, Wilson, and Malave 29). Jomo Kenyatta details the initiation ceremony of the Gikuyu tribe. He writes, "the girls sits down on the hide, while their family relatives and friends form a sort of circle . . . no male is allowed to go near or even to peep through this cordon" (Kenyatta 145). Women are culpable for circumcising their own daughters. Although patriarchal



society is the underlying force determining this action, it is women who actually use the knife to cut their daughters. At the behest of patriarchal society mothers intentionally abandon their daughters' needs and desires.

In *Warrior Marks* Walker details an interview with one mother, Mary, from the Gambia. Mary's daughter, 'little Mary' was being circumcised that day along with several other young girls in the tribe. Walker asks Mary why she chose to have her daughter circumcised. She responds:

Because it is tradition, she replied. Had it been done to her? Of course. How had this come about? Well, her mother had told her they were going to a place where there were many bananas. (She loved bananas). When they arrived, she was captured by women she'd never seen before, pinned down by them, circumcised, and kept secluded for two weeks. Was she frightened? Yes. Did she feel her mother had betrayed her? Well, at the time, perhaps, but later she understood it was tradition . . . did she think little Mary would feel betrayed, angry with her? Well she intended to take her some sweets and soon she would forget all about what had happened to her. (Walker, *Warrior Marks* 42).

Despite acknowledging the betrayal she felt as a young girl toward her own mother who failed to explain what the circumcision rite was, Mary has chosen to have her daughter undergo the same rite of passage. Walker presses her further asking, "if she could stop this 'tradition,' would she? She could not hope to stop it, being only a woman. But if she could, by some miracle, stop it, would she? Yes. Why? Because of the pain . . . there was suddenly a look in her eyes as if a deep pit within her had opened; I encountered the

blankness of terror” (Walker, *Warrior Marks* 42). Because of her sex, Mary does not believe she holds the power to stop the tradition of circumcision. Therefore, despite remembering her pain with a look of horror years later, she still feels obligated to ensure that her own daughter obeys the same rituals. This betrayal is cyclical. As Debold, Malave and Wilson note:

The dilemmas that girls face as they enter adolescence are painful and traumatic, but the dilemma mothers face is perhaps more painful. For mothers who made their own painful compromises and self-amputations in order psychologically to enter patriarchy, bearing witness to a daughter’s struggle not only causes pain but rekindles their own preadolescent anxiety, pain, and helplessness. (Debold, Wilson, and Malave 20)

Mothers are forced to remember the pain of their own psychological, and sometimes physical, mutilations when their daughters undergo the same situations or rites of passage. “Ironically, and tragically, mothers are blamed for the very betrayal that they themselves suffered” (Debold, Wilson, and Malave 55). Instead of halting the cycle, mothers succumb to the pressures of the dominant patriarchy and bear witness to their daughters’ suffering.

Because of the lies she is told growing up, Tashi is forced to learn on her own the implications of circumcision, years later, when she gives birth to Benny in America. She recalls the birth of her son stating:

The obstetrician broke two instruments trying to 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. All this he told me when I woke up, a look of horror lingering on his face . . . 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. (Walker, *Possessing* 57)

Tashi does not know what to expect from her pregnancy. She is shocked to learn she is pregnant because “after three months of trying, he [Adam] had failed to penetrate me. Each time he touched me I bled. Each time he moved against me I winced. There was nothing he could do to me that did not hurt. Still, somehow, I became pregnant with Benny . . . we were terrorized waiting for his birth” (Walker, *Possessing* 59). Tashi undergoes such a traumatic labor experience that she aborts her fetus when she discovers she is pregnant for the second time. According to Dr. Louis Genevie, author of *The Motherhood Report*, “The emotional and physical experience of pregnancy are indelibly intertwined” (Genevie 109). In fact, the way in which women experience childbirth has an effect on how they feel about the child afterwards. “How a woman experiences childbirth—how much pain she feels, how she feels before, during and after the event—has as much to do with her emotional state as it does with the physical aspects of the process” (Genevie 110). The pain Tashi feels in childbirth is one of the reasons why she is ultimately unable to accept and love her own son. Added to the pain of Tashi’s birth is the embarrassment of being judged by doctors and nursing staff in American hospitals. She writes:

No matter how sick I became during the pregnancy, I attended myself. I could not bear the thought of the quick-stepping American nurses looking at me as if I were some creature from beyond their imaginings. In the end, though, I was that

creature. For even as I gave birth, a crowd of nurses, curious hospital staff and medical students gathered around my bed. For days afterward doctors and nurses from around the city and for all I know around the state came by to peer over the shoulder of my doctor as he examined me. (Walker, *Possessing* 59)

Moreover, Tashi is unable to adequately love her son because of the guilt she feels for his mental illness caused by the suffocation he experienced while the doctor's tried to make Tashi's vaginal opening large enough for Benny to emerge.

Further, Tashi is unable to accept Benny because he is a man. Despite being her son, Tashi associates Benny with the dominant patriarchal society and the wound inflicted upon her by such a society. Dr. Genevie discusses the different relationships mothers form with sons and daughters. He writes, "The effect of a child's sex on the mother-child relationship was similar to that of birth order . . . most mothers felt they did not relate to sons and daughters in the same way . . . they treated and raised them differently" (Genevie 198). Tashi is never able to establish a close relationship with Benny, not only because of her guilt but also because of his sex. "Mother-son relationships were much less close" (Genevie 287). Tashi laments while in prison for M'Lissa's murder of her son's constant desire to be close to her. "I watched Benny struggle with all his might to be close to me, to melt into my body, to inhale my scent; and I was like a crow, flapping my wings unceasingly in my own head, cawing mutely across an empty sky" (Walker, *Possessing* 217). Walker includes excerpts from Benny's own memories regarding his experience with his mother. He states:

One of my mother's favorite expressions was: It's a wonder you don't forget I'm your mother! But I never did. Perhaps it was because I felt connected to her scent. Which was warm, lovely, *soft*. I felt I could quite happily have spent my lifetime under one of her arms. This, however, I never mentioned because I sensed it would offend her . . . even now, in middle age, I like to snuggle her, though contorting my lanky body into a shape that fits cuddly under her neck is something of a feat. She barely tolerates it, though, and immediately moves away. (Walker, *Possessing* 94).

Tashi is unable to embrace Benny because of her associations with patriarchal society. M'Lissa comments on the fear women have of their own sons betraying them and hurting another woman as they once were hurt. She states:

Even if they themselves almost died the first time a man broke into their bodies, they want to be told it was a minor hurt . . . that their daughters will barely notice . . . if I tell them that, it makes it almost possible for them not to completely despise their sons. For the pain they inflict. Yes. Breaking into someone else's daughter. Just as another woman's son breaks into theirs. (Walker, *Possessing* 239)

Tashi fears that despite her efforts, she will be raising a man who will inevitably fill his place in the patriarchal order, inflicting the same pain on someone else's daughter.

Because of her fear, Tashi chooses to abort her second child. Awa Thiam remarks that the lack of apparent affection does not stem from a deficiency of instinctual love for the child but rather the lack of courage and defiance to brave the patriarchal order. "It is

not lack of maternal affection that makes a woman abandon her child. It must be with anguish in her heart that she parts from this little creature . . . her baby . . . supposing that she had been able to brave a patriarchal system, would she not have acted quite differently?" (Thiam 44). Tashi cannot embrace Benny but does not lack instinctual love for him. In fact, Tashi exudes a maternal affection for M'Bati.<sup>9</sup> Upon meeting M'Bati on her return to Africa and to M'Lissa's home, Tashi laments for the daughter she could have had. M'Bati becomes the daughter Tashi envisioned herself having. M'Bati is described as possessing a "healthy, impish twinkle in her eyes" (Walker, *Possessing* 156), similar to the one Tashi as a young child, still defiant, possessed, "cheerful, impish . . . graceful, and quick with the liveliness of her personality" (Walker, *Possessing* 65). M'Bati, despite being circumcised has not yet lost her will to fight. At the end of the novel, M'Bati leads the village women in the greatest act of defiance before Tashi's execution.

Despite Tashi's inability to overcome her patriarchal wounds, M'Bati is effectively able to turn her circumcision into a warrior mark. Walker, therefore, does not leave her reader without hope at the end of the novel, but rather, with the idea that by joining together to resist the demands of patriarchal society, and further, by defying them, women can effectively end patriarchal rule. Before the day of her execution Tashi asks M'Bati what the secret to possessing joy is. M'Bati responds, "we are *women*. We must find out!" (Walker, *Possessing* 269). Although Tashi does not believe that circumcised

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<sup>9</sup> Tashi meets M'Bati, M'Lissa's attendant, upon her return to Africa. M'Bati and Tashi quickly develop a close bond. M'Bati spends time with Tashi while she is in jail and leads the final act of resistance to show Tashi what is the secret to possessing joy before her execution.

women can ever “have that look of confidence. Of pride. Of peace . . . because self-possession will always be impossible for us to claim,” (Walker, *Possessing* 271) she does have faith that the future can be different for other generations of women. M’Bati, however, defies the “rockjawed men with machine guns” (Walker, *Possessing* 278) in a silent act of rebellion the day of Tashi’s execution. “The women then place the babies on their shoulders or on their heads, where they kick their naked legs, smile with pleasure, screech with terror, or occasionally wave. It is a protest and celebration the men threatening them do not even recognize” (Walker, *Possessing* 278). The babies, sitting atop their mothers’ heads, receive a pleasurable sensation that their mothers can no longer experience. In that moment M’Bati, along with Adam, Olivia, Benny, Pierre, and Raye holds up a sign that reads, “RESISTANCE IS THE SECRET OF JOY!” (Walker, *Possessing* 279). Walker thereby reveals resistance to be the underlying message of the struggle to end FGC, which corresponds with the message of Awa Thiam, Fran Hosken, and Nawal El Saadawi.

Women can fight the dominant patriarchy only if they together resist the demands such a patriarchy asserts. The mother daughter relationship, as Debold, Wilson and Malave assert, can transform into a powerful and protective bond. They write:

If mothers could step outside the stultifying order of patriarchal relationships by joining with the girls they once were, with the parts of themselves that they have lost, with their daughters, as well as with other women, then perhaps something radically new could happen . . . if women and girls together resist giving up relationship for the sake of ‘relationships,’ then this meeting holds the potential for societal and cultural change. (Debold, Wilson, and Malave 30)

The unity of mothers to daughter and women to girls can revolutionize the entire societal order, according to these women. These authors define the ‘wall’ of patriarchal culture as the barrier that asserts that women are less valuable than men. (Debold, Wilson and Malave 11). Carol Gilligan, in her Harvard study, deduces that, “Women meeting girls at this crossroads, at the foot of the wall, transforms the act of mothering from betrayal—which literally means ‘turning over to the enemy’—into power and connection” (Debold, Wilson and Malave 30). M’Bati and the mothers who stand with her represent a force capable of enacting this change; together, these women can overturn the infliction of pain on their daughters at the demand of patriarchal society; Walker’s message is that they can effectively end FGC. Although Tashi, betrayed by her mother, is unable to resist the demands of patriarchal society, there is hope that women of future generations will share their experiences and thereby refuse to betray their daughters to patriarchal society.



Chapter Four: A Jungian Lens: The Psychology of Female Genital Cutting

“With her essence denied, what remains of herself? *There is nothing of her left*”

(Thiam 117).

Walker does not only present the history of FGC and analyze the physical ramifications of genital mutilation in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, but also focuses on Tashi’s psychological strife. Tashi goes through several different psychological states within the novel. Through the vignettes of other characters, the reader learns that Tashi was a self-possessed and jovial child. All of Tashi’s self-possession was lost after she was mutilated. She entered a severe phase of repression, in which, she could not consciously recall much of her childhood. Finally, with the help of several psychologists Tashi begins to gain understanding regarding what she has lost. With the introduction of these psychologists, Walker invokes her own commentary regarding psychoanalysis today. There are two important psychologists who aid Tashi in gaining this understanding, the first, Mzee, is Walker’s fictional representation of Dr. Carl Jung. The second, Raye, is an African American female who Mzee instructs Tashi to visit upon her return to America. Raye challenges Tashi to redefine her views of America and to explain why she *chose* to be circumcised. She also challenges Tashi to reconcile her own identity. Tashi changes her name upon her arrival in America and is denoted differently throughout the novel. She is referred to as Tashi, the name given her at childbirth, Evelyn, her American name, Tashi-Evelyn, and Mrs. Johnson, her married name. At the end of the novel, however, all of these identities are interwoven in Tashi’s final portrayal before death, suggesting that she has reconciled her various identities. Walker chooses to use the voice of Jung to exemplify Tashi’s psychological experience largely because of his emphasis on dreams, particularly as voiced through archetypes and the collective

unconscious. The Jungian analysis of *Possessing the Secret of Joy* allows the reader to derive an understanding of Tashi's psychological experience while also deducing the meaning of certain symbols and reoccurring images presented in the novel.

Tashi's psychological journey begins when she leaves Africa and voyages with Adam to America. Here, Tashi begins to understand aspects of herself and her mutilation that were never spoken about within the Olinka community. Tashi's journey to gain understanding, however, is long and complicated. She has repressed many memories and sees three different psychologists on her journey; each psychologist represents a new aspect of Tashi's acceptance and understanding. First, Tashi sees a "white witch doctor," (Walker, *Possessing* 10) who she does not feel comfortable sharing any of her dreams or private thoughts with. Walker presents this doctor as having little regard for Tashi and minimal understanding of who she is. "I feel him, there behind my head, pen poised to at last capture on paper an African woman's psychosis for the greater glory of his profession" (Walker, *Possessing* 11). As Mzee later remarks, "Healing is not a bourgeois profession" (Walker, *Possessing* 80). This psychologist is never able to gain Tashi's trust or help her because he represents bourgeois psychology, which Walker criticizes for having very little regard for the individual patient's needs.

Not only does this psychologist fail to help Tashi, but he also has no understanding of her life experiences. Adam and Tashi both take notice of the strange office décor, largely decorated with African sculptures and tribal rugs. "There are small stone and clay figures of African gods and goddesses from Ancient Egypt. I noticed them before lying down on his couch, which is covered by a tribal rug" (Walker, *Possessing* 11). The décor of the office matches the doctor's lack of understanding of Africa, and

particularly, of Tashi's own psychosis. He speaks of African women as an entire entity rather than understanding his patient's personal experiences. "He'd been taken aback by the fact that I had only one child. He thought this unusual for a colored woman, married or unmarried. Your people like lots of kids, he allowed" (Walker, *Possessing* 18). These generalizations reiterate the simple lack of understanding he possesses for Tashi and for African people in general. He is a nameless, imitator of "the father of psychoanalysis," (Walker, *Possessing* 11) and lacks the ability to establish a personal repertoire with Tashi.

Because of his inability to relate to Tashi on a personal level, this nameless psychologist is never effective in gaining Tashi's trust. She, therefore, never reveals her mutilation to him. Tashi cannot answer the psychologist's question regarding children because she does not feel comfortable sharing these intimate details with a stranger. "But how could I talk to this stranger of my lost children? And of how they were lost? One was left speechless by all such a person couldn't know" (Walker, *Possessing* 18). When asked about her dreams Tashi refuses to share her night terrors, choosing instead to lie and say she does not dream. "And what about your dreams? The doctor one day asks me. I tell him I do not dream. I do not dare tell him about the dream I have every night that terrifies me" (Walker, *Possessing* 25). The biggest breach of trust, however, is the psychologist's sharing of information with Tashi's husband Adam. Adam tells of his experience meeting the psychologist, stating:

Your wife refuses to talk about her dreams, the doctor says, mysteriously . . . I sit uneasily in my chair, as if I am being interrogated as a spy. I shrug. I certainly cannot speak of them. But I am instantly back in our bed, sharing the night and its

terrors with my wife. She is upright, clutching her pillow. Her eyes are enormous. She is shaking with fear. (Walker, *Possessing* 26)

Tashi sees this psychologist for months and never establishes an effective relationship with him. Walker depicts this psychologist as a hyperbolic example of the fundamental lack of understanding men sometimes have for women and Americans for Africans. Tashi writes, “You have to keep us in mind . . . and we would laugh, because it was so easy to forget Africa in America” (Walker, *Possessing* 12). This psychologist is part of the patriarchal order that Tashi seeks to escape. Not only is he a man, incapable of breaking with his patriarchal understanding of women, but he also is a great imitator, as Tashi labels him.

Olivia has brought me here. Not to the father of psychoanalysis, for he has died, a tired, persecuted man. But to one of his sons, whose imitation of him—including dark hair and a beard, Egyptian statuettes on his desk, the tribal-rug-covered couch and the cigar, which smells of bitterness—will perhaps cure me. (Walker, *Possessing* 11)

Because of Tashi’s associations with patriarchal society and her lack of security with this psychologist, she is never able to uncover any of her repressed memories or gain any understanding into the true meaning of her nightmares.

Subsequently, Walker did not feel ready to write Tashi’s story until a visit to Carl Jung’s home in Switzerland. It is worthy to note that much of Tashi’s visit to Mzee’s estate mirrors Walker’s own visit to Jung’s home. Walker recalls, “Suddenly, there it was. The lake, the thick stone walls of the tower. The door to the courtyard. Once more I

hesitated. Inside and outside the tower. In the loggia. Robert photographed me . . . with my fingers just grazing Jung's hand carved alchemical stone, this stone that represents both transformation and transcendence" (Alice Walker Papers, Manuscripts Archives and Rare Books Library, Emory University). Jung's alchemical stone served as the image on the original cover of *Possessing the Secret of Joy* because it exemplified Tashi's journey of transformation. After her visit, Walker wrote:

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. 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 Papers, Manuscripts Archives and Rare Books Library, Emory University)

Jungian theory enabled Walker to unite the experiences of mutilated women and women worldwide who suffer. Further it provided the foundation for Walker's analysis of Tashi's psychology. "I leaned on the wisdom and grace of many a psychiatrist and psychologist. One of them, Dr. Carl Jung, entered the novel as Mzee, 'the old man,' who tenderly begins to guide Tashi, the character who was mutilated, back to mental health" (Walker, *Possessing* ix). Jungian descriptions of the collective unconscious, archetypes,

the animus or feminine consciousness and in particular, the primordial image of the Great Mother, are all presented within *Possessing the Secret of Joy*.

Above all, the Jungian emphasis on the ‘whole’ person, comprised of both the conscious and unconscious thoughts and actions of the individual, served as the basis for Walker’s analysis of an intrinsically ‘not whole’ woman. Walker, in her study of mutilated women, consistently draws the conclusion that these women suffer immensely throughout their entire lives. Not only because they have lost a fundamental part of their bodies but also because they endured a psychologically damaging experience, the memory of which they cannot effectively escape. Tashi screams to a courthouse of people, “Can you bear to know what I have lost? I scream this at the judges, in their stupid white wigs. And at the lawyers—my own and the one hired to prosecute me . . . but most of all, I scream it at my family: Adam, Olivia, and Benny. No one responds to my question. The prosecuting attorney suppresses a smile because I have lost control” (Walker, *Possessing* 35). Similarly, Walker remarks after an interview conducted for *Warrior Marks*, “I had to stop writing yesterday because I couldn’t bear it. The enormity of what they’ve lost (had taken, by force, from them) will not be clear to these girls until much later in life . . . the girls have been robbed of their full capacity for pleasure” (Walker, *Warrior Marks* 43). Jung writes:

Anyone who has probed more deeply into the nature of psychology, demanding something more of it than science in the wretchedly prescribed limits of a natural science method is able to yield, will also have realized that an experimental method will never succeed in doing justice to the nature of the human soul, nor

will it ever trace even an approximately faithful picture of the complicated psychic phenomena. (Jung 518-519)

Jung strives, despite these obstacles, to encompass all aspects of the individual in his psychological examinations. “By the psyche I understand the totality of all the psychic processes, both conscious as well as unconscious; whereas by *soul*, I understand a definitely demarcated function-complex that is best characterized as a ‘personality’” (Jung 588). Jung’s emphasis on dreams and the unconscious ultimately was one of the factors causing the deterioration of his partnership with Freud. His desire to define and take into consideration all aspects of the human psyche, however, is emulated by Walker. In her analysis of Tashi, Walker encompasses matters of the soul, the conscious, and the unconscious in order to identify why Tashi could never gain serenity and wholeness after undergoing the circumcision ritual.

In order to understand the significance of Jungian concepts in Tashi’s psychological journey there are several terms that must be defined as they relate to *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. The *persona*, as Jung defines it, is “The personality that we show ‘up front’ . . . it is the face that one presents to the world . . . no one wears the same mask on all occasions. Each mask is a response to a specific situation or individual” (Mattoon 18). This is fundamental to understanding Tashi because she employs several different personas, even changing her name, within the novel. A name is the most basic form of identity. Tashi’s lack of a singular name is one of the primary ways Walker depicts her lack of a clear persona. Tashi does not know how to relate to the distinct groups of people in her life except to alter herself, exemplified by the alteration of her name.

Tashi is introduced to the reader as a young girl with her birth name given to her by her mother: Tashi. This name is representative of her African past and her self-possession. Adam remembers Tashi from childhood stating, “She always stood her ground . . . I liked her self-possession” (Walker, *Possessing* 27). For the remainder of the novel, when Tashi is forced to reflect on past memories or recall moments from her childhood amongst the Olinka tribe, she is entitled Tashi. Similarly, the few times that Tashi as an adult, acts with the same courage that Adam once admired, she is referred to with her original name. In part three of the novel, however, Tashi is identified for the first time as Evelyn, with no immediate explanation for the sudden name change. It becomes clear that the name Evelyn is emblematic of Tashi’s American identity. “My fantasy life. Without it I’m afraid to exist. Who am I, Tashi, renamed in America ‘Evelyn,’ Johnson?” (Walker, *Possessing* 36). This fantasy life is Tashi’s escape from the reality of her physical wounds. She envisions America as an idealized safe space in order to preserve her sanity and escape her past.

Slowly, however, as Tashi undergoes therapy and begins to remember her past, her vision of America is diluted. The deterioration of Tashi’s American vision is portrayed in her name and she begins to be referred to as Tashi-Evelyn or Evelyn-Tashi (Walker, *Possessing* 57), combinations of her birth name and subsequent American identity. The first time this combination occurs is when Tashi retells the story of Benny’s birth. Due to the pain and embarrassment of having her wounds exposed, Tashi is unable to forget the past in this moment. Because she is in America, however, she is attempting to continue existing with her remade identity as Evelyn. M’Lissa challenges Tashi (when Tashi returns to Africa to kill the circumciser) to define what an American is. This is



when Tashi finally realizes, “An American, I said, sighing, but understanding my love of my adopted country perhaps for the first time: an American looks like a wounded person whose wound is hidden from other, and sometimes from herself. An American looks like me” (Walker, *Possessing* 208). At the end of the novel, Tashi recognizes that she attempted to hide her identity and wounds upon entering America. She is finally able to reconcile her identities and as such is labeled Tashi-Evelyn-Mrs. Johnson before her death because each identity is emblematic of a distinct and important part of who Tashi ultimately becomes.

Another aspect of Jungian theory that is intrinsically linked to understanding Tashi is the importance of the unconscious. The *Ego*, as Jung defines it, “is the center of consciousness—initiator, director and observer of one’s conscious experiences” (Mattoon 19). Tashi’s conscious experiences are exemplified through her confusion and lack of a concrete identity. Tashi’s *Ego*, however, differs drastically from her fantastical daydreams and night terrors. Her unconscious thought is emblematic of what Jung labels the shadow, which is, “omnipresent. It consists of psychic contents that a person prefers not to show or even to acknowledge” (Mattoon 28). In her dreams and hallucinations Tashi attempts to escape reality, however, this often guides her to uncover repressed memories from her childhood that she has attempted to forget.

Tashi’s dreams can be understood through Jungian archetypes. Her dreams advance the notion that the unconscious can reveal concepts and memories that our conscious mind needs in order to survive. Mary Ann Mattoon, a contemporary of Jung’s writes:

In Jungian psychology, the term [archetypes] refers neither to perfection nor to fixed images. Jung described archetypes as ‘typical (uniform and recurring) modes of apprehension.’ Thus, the archetype is a predisposition to an image; it underlies and shapes a variety of specific images . . . the psyche needs to bring such contents into consciousness, and uses hallucinations when the dream route is blocked. (Mattoon 36-115)

Tashi’s dreams bring repressed memories back to her conscious. She uncovers such memories through the images presented in her dreams. One reoccurring dream Tashi has is of a tower. She states:

There is a tower . . . I think it is a tower. It is tall, but I am inside. I don’t really ever know what it looks like from outside. It is cool at first, and as you descend lower and lower to where I’m kept, it becomes dank and cold, as well. It’s dark. There is an endless repetitive sound that is like the faint scratch of a baby’s fingernails on paper. And there are millions of things moving about me in the dark . . . and I cannot move! (Walker, *Possessing* 26)

This tower is indicative of Walker’s reflections of the termite hill in *Warrior Marks*. Walker views the tower of the termite as a “complete universe in motion, a world, a neighborhood, a community” (Walker, *Warrior Marks* 84). In fact, Tashi is much like the ‘termite queen’ who Walker describes as enslaved within the tower. “I thought of the termite ‘queen’ inside the mound and marveled at the way her life—unknown, of course, to her—has been a model for the life of women in many African cultures. And how she, oblivious, and with her own problem of enslavement, could not care less” (Walker,

*Warrior Marks* 85). The idea of enslavement becomes the archetypal expression for Tashi's reoccurring tower dream.

In *Possessing the Secret of Joy* this tower is a focal point in Tashi's relationship with Adam's son Pierre. Pierre writes to Tashi after his mother's death and states, "This tower question obsessed my mother since the day she heard of it, and she read many books trying to figure out what it could mean. It was an effort I shared, from the time I was a small boy . . . Madame I now know what the tower is, though not, perhaps, what it means" (Walker, *Possessing* 160). Together, Pierre and Raye reveal the images of the termite hill to Tashi while she is in prison for the murder of M'Lissa. Pierre discusses the anthropological history regarding the termite hill as spanning back to the first human beings on earth (who came from Africa). They learned from the termites; "there was a strong identification with the termite, which Africans call 'white ant' . . . the termite has kept a place for males in its society. There is a queen, but also a king. Perhaps this is why, also, the people felt an affinity for it" (Walker, *Possessing* 226). Humans learned from the termites and emulated their way of life. Raye and Pierre explain Tashi's dream as relating to this way of life. They state:

This, Madame Johnson, is your dark tower. You are the queen who loses her wings. It is you lying in the dark with millions of worker termites—who are busy, by the way, maintaining mushroom farms from which they feed you—buzzing about. You being stuffed with food at one end . . . and having your eggs, millions of them, constantly removed at the other . . . You who endure all this, only at the end to die, and be devoured by those to whom you've given birth. (Walker, *Possessing* 227)

Both Pierre and Raye seek to explain every aspect of Tashi's dream and demonstrate what each part represents. Walker expands the archetypal tower to relate to the expectations of women in patriarchal society. Raye states:

That you, as a woman, were expected to reproduce as helplessly and inertly as a white ant but in a culture in which it is mandatory that every single female be systematically desexed, there would have to be some coded, mythological reason given for it, used secretly among the village elders. (Walker, *Possessing* 227)

Eric Neumann identifies the female figure as a vessel. He states that, "woman = body = vessel = world" (Neumann 43). The woman's ability to carry life, however, can be manipulated and abused so that, like Tashi experiences, the feeling of helplessness persists. "Woman as body-vessel is the natural expression of the human experience of woman bearing the child 'within' her and of man entering 'into' her in the sexual act" (Neumann 42). Neumann defines this as the elementary character of the Feminine.

Walker, as well as other scholars, shows how this one element is exploited by patriarchal society and results in the 'systematic desexing' of women. Interestingly, Mzee has a tower in his home that Tashi does not fear. "In any event, I must ask Evelyn why she does not seem to fear my turret/tower" (Walker, *Possessing* 84). Tashi does not fear this tower because in Mzee's home she is free—not only to express her feelings—but also to be empowered by them.

The tower represents the specific image for the archetypal thought Tashi possesses. Tashi's tower can be understood as an, 'underlying mode of apprehension' because this image is evocative of Tashi's fear. She, like the termite queen, is trapped,

her clitoris (for which the termite hill is universally symbolic)<sup>10</sup> and that which represents her femininity having been removed from her. Society, like the functioning of a termite hill, expects nothing more from her aside from reproduction and obedience. Upon her encounter with Mzee, Tashi is finally able to confront her nightmares. No longer afraid to analyze them, Tashi is able to uncover many repressed childhood memories and better understand the extent of what she has lost both physically and emotionally.

Mzee provides Tashi with paints and shows her films from his time in Africa to help her find a means to express that which she has attempted to forget. As part of her therapy, Tashi is instructed to draw. “The first thing I drew was the meeting of my mother and the leopard on her path. For this, after all, represented my birth. My entrance into reality. But I drew, then painted, a leopard with two legs. My terrified mother with four” (Walker, *Possessing* 54). Tashi cannot understand the meaning of her ‘terrified’ mother with four legs. She continues to paint unusual representations with no clear understanding of what they mean until watching a grainy black and white film with Mzee one night. She writes:

It was during the showing of one of these films that something peculiar happened to me. He was explaining a scene in which there were several small children lying in a row on the ground . . . He assumed, he said, he had inadvertently interrupted a kind of ritual ceremony having to do with the preparation of these children for

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<sup>10</sup> Walker writes extensively on this in *Warrior Marks* in which she discusses the physical attributes of the termite hill that are reminiscent of the female clitoris. She also alludes to this in *Possessing the Secret of Joy* in which she discusses the original form of the female (earth) who’s “sexual organ is an anthill, and its clitoris a termite hill” (Walker, *Possessing* 169).

adulthood. Everything, in any case, had stopped, the moment he and his entourage entered the ritual space. (Walker, *Possessing* 70)

Mzee shows Tashi this film with the hope that it will enable her to recall memories from her childhood. As she watches, however, her fear overcomes her and she faints. “There was a large fighting cock . . . it walked about quite freely, crowing mightily . . . the film ran on, but suddenly I felt such an overwhelming fear that I fainted. Quietly . . . when I came to . . . there was nothing I could tell them; I could not say, the picture of a fighting cock, taken twenty five years ago, completely terrorized me” (Walker, *Possessing* 71). The image of the fighting cock provides Tashi with the impetus to remember her sister Dura’s death. She begins “to paint what became a rather extended series of ever larger and more fearsome fighting cocks. And then one day, into the corner of my painting, there appeared, I drew, a foot. Sweating and shivering as I did so” (Walker, *Possessing* 71). Eventually, Tashi draws the entire depiction, spanning the walls of her guest room, of what Mzee and Adam would subsequently label, “The Beast” (Walker, *Possessing* 78). The completion of the painting marks Tashi’s first breakthrough in recalling previously repressed memories. Mzee deems the depiction remarkable and has only one question for Tashi. He asks her, “Are you better for having done it?” (Walker, *Possessing* 80). To which Tashi immediately responds, “Immeasurably, I said without hesitation” (Walker, *Possessing* 80).

Jung thereby draws parallels between the workings of the unconscious and an individual’s conscious; however, he also connects individual unconscious to universal motifs and images. Bettina Knapp, a Jungian scholar, writes:

By drawing parallels between the workings of the individual unconscious, shown in images produced in the dreams of his patients, with the universal recurrent eternal motifs found in religions and works of art, Jung thereby enlarged the scope of psychotherapy. It became not only a curative agent that relates to ‘the whole history and evolution of the human psyche in all of its manifestations’ but also a technique that could help develop the potential of well-adjusted normal and superior human beings. (Knapp ix)

Jungian literary criticism thereby seeks to remove an image from its specific context and relate it to humankind in general; this comparison results in what Jung labels *the collective unconscious*:

Archetypal analysis takes the literary work out of its individual and conventional context and relates it to humankind in general. This unique approach lifts readers out of their specific and perhaps isolated worlds and allows them to expand their vision, and thus to relate more easily to issues that may confront them and to understand their reality as part of an ongoing and cyclical reality. (Knapp x)

The archetypes important to an analysis of Tashi’s psychology are those expressed in her dreams, namely the nightmare of the tower and the representation of the chicken.

Intrinsic to the analysis of the novel, however, is the archetypal image of the mother with four legs.

The Great Mother, according to Eric Neumann, who worked closely with Jung, is a primordial image preceding the existence of all other archetypes. “When analytical psychology speaks of the primordial image or archetype of the Great Mother, it is

referring, not to any concrete image existing in space and time, but to an inward image at work in the human psyche” (Neumann 3). The Great Mother is a psychological construct manifested in both consciousness and the unconscious. Neumann argues that, “a vast number of forms, symbols, and images of views, aspects, and concepts . . . which complement one another and apparently emerge independently of one another, but all of which are connected with *one* archetype, e.g. that of the Great Mother” (Neumann 9). The Great Mother thereby becomes a primary psychological concern, both in how it shapes an individual’s psyche and how it shapes the psychology of the Feminine. Tashi struggles with the demands of motherhood and with conflicting views of her own mother. All of the images that comprise the Great Mother are expressed through individual portrayals of maternal figures in the novel. The good is portrayed through Mzee’s maternal guidance. The good-bad in Tashi’s experiences with her own mother and the terrible in the portrayal of M’Lissa and the elders who misguide the youth. These maternal representations serve as important factors in shaping Tashi’s psychology (namely the terrible mother and the good-bad mother).<sup>11</sup>

Although there is not one concrete definition for the Great Mother, the archetype is intrinsically linked to the Jungian conception of the Archetypal Feminine (Neumann 11). Unlike Freud, Jung did not view woman as an incomplete man, but rather he, “considered the two genders in relation to each other” (Mattoon 49). The animus-anima

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<sup>11</sup> Eric Neumann, 21.

Neumann identifies the form of the Great Mother as “discernible in the elements. She has three forms: the good, the terrible, and the good-bad mother.” The Terrible Mother containing negative elements, the Good Mother comprised of the good elements (both feminine and masculine) and the good-bad building a union of positive/negative attributes that comprise the form of the Great Mother.



theory is “crucial in Jung’s view of females and males: that each gender’s consciousness is paired with the unconsciousness of the other” (Mattoon 49). The Animus or Archetypal Feminine is the “contrasexual (male) archetypal component of the female psyche” (Mattoon 49). This relates to female power and self-possession, specifically that which Tashi loses after her mutilation.

The image of the primordial mother, the Great Mother, is advanced in Walker’s portrayal of Mzee, the first psychologist to help Tashi and the only nurturing mother figure Tashi ever has. The safety of his presence and his home enables Tashi to begin to uncover repressed memories of her past, like the true nature of her sister Dura’s death. His home in Switzerland is also the first place where Tashi speaks of her circumcision. Immediately, Tashi associates Switzerland with safety. “From the airplane window the whole of Switzerland seemed to be quietly sleeping. Everything neat and trim, *safe*” (Walker, *Possessing* 37). She explains how Mzee, although no longer an active practitioner, agreed to have Tashi stay with him as a patient. “He is no longer actively practicing his profession as doctor of the soul. He is seeing me only because I am an African woman and my case was recommended to him by his niece, my husband’s friend and lover, the Frenchwoman, Lisette” (Walker, *Possessing* 49). Tashi feels an allegiance to The Old Man. “I liked The Old Man immediately. Liked his great, stooping height; the looseness of the ever-present tweed jacket that hung from his gaunt shoulders . . . liked, even, that he himself had at times a look of madness to match my own . . . in other words, he looked as if he would soon die. I found this comforting” (Walker, *Possessing* 49-50). The presence of Mzee is comforting because there is something about his home and the landscape, despite being so different from the African community Tashi grew up in, that

reminds her of being a child. Tashi immediately recognizes something maternal and nurturing about Mzee.

I did not fear him partly because I did not fear his house . . . it had at its center a stone hut, round, with a large fireplace and flagstone hearth. He knelt there, his old knees creaking, to light the morning and evening fire, over which he cooked; and seemed to me, at times, an old African grandmother, metamorphosed somehow into a giant pinkfaced witchdoctor on this other, colder continent.

(Walker, *Possessing* 52)

Tashi is comforted by this image of The Old Man, who was also always wearing an apron of some sort. His caretaking enables Tashi to return to her young self. Both Adam and Mzee recognize her as glowing, unlike beforehand. More importantly, however, Mzee provides Tashi with a maternal safety that she did not have from her own mother growing up. This safety enables Tashi to recognize her circumcision and recall her repressed childhood memories.

Upon completion of her painting of ‘The Beast,’ Tashi is prompted to recall the true nature of the biggest lie of her childhood: her sister Dura’s death. Mzee asks Tashi if the foot in the painting belongs to a man or woman. This prompts her to acknowledge, her “sister Dura’s . . . my sister Dura’s . . . I could get no further. There was boulder lodged in my throat . . . I knew what the boulder was; that it was a word; and that behind that word I would find my earliest emotions. Emotions that had frightened me insane . . . I remembered my sister Dura’s *murder*” (Walker, *Possessing* 81). Tashi begins “to wail, there in Mzee’s old arms. After a long time, he dried my face, stroked my hair, and

comforted me with a motherly squeeze that coincided with each of my hiccups, as my weeping subsided” (Walker, *Possessing* 81). Mzee is able to provide the maternal support and protection that Tashi’s own mother was never able to give her. He is not only a maternal figure providing emotional guidance but his presence is also a physical comfort to Tashi, much like a mother’s presence would be for her daughter. This moment of release marks the first time that Tashi relives and remembers her sister Dura’s murder, and calling it such means Tashi understands that it was not merely a death for which “no one was responsible” (Walker, *Possessing* 81).

The final psychologist Tashi works with is Raye, who is recommended to her by Mzee. Raye, an African American woman, poses many of the toughest questions to Tashi. With Mzee, Tashi broke the barrier to remember her past. With Raye, however, Tashi begins to make judgments and explore her own decision-making. Ultimately, Raye stands with Tashi’s family before Tashi’s execution in Africa. At first, Tashi is resentful towards Raye. “The shrink The Old Man sent me to after his death was a middle-aged African-American woman named Raye . . . I resented her. Because she wasn’t Mzee. Because she was black. Because she was a woman. Because she was whole” (Walker, *Possessing* 113). For many reasons, working with a woman is challenging and new for Tashi. Raye is whole and therefore has something Tashi no longer has: self-possession.

Tashi, however, establishes a close bond with Raye and is able to overcome her resentment towards Raye’s self-possession and strength. In fact, the two become so closely bonded that Raye wishes to gain a clearer understanding of the pain Tashi suffered having undergone her mutilation. “I grew to trust Raye. One day when I went in to see her I found her with her cheeks puffed out like a squirrel. Her skin was ashen and

she looked awful. What's the matter? I asked. She grimaced. Gum mutilation" (Walker, *Possessing* 130). Tashi grows angry with Raye and yells at her for having undergone the procedure. Raye responds: "Don't be mad because my choosing this kind of pain seems such a puny effort, she said. In America it's the best I can do. Besides, it gives me a faint idea. *And* it was something I needed to do anyway" (Walker, *Possessing* 131). Tashi realizes that:

I was angry because I was touched. I realized that though Raye had left African hundreds of years before in the persons of her ancestors and studied at the best of the white man's schools, she was intuitively practicing an ageless magic, the foundation of which was the ritualization, or the acting out, of empathy. (Walker, *Possessing* 131)

Raye gains Tashi's trust by empathizing and attempting to gain a similar understanding of the pain and suffering she has endured. In her therapy with Raye, Tashi gets her first glimpse of the global nature of female suffering. Benoitte Groult, one of the first feminists to analyze FGC in her text *Ainsi Soient-Elles*, remarks, "The pain is felt in our own female organs. We feel sick for ourselves. Our human dignity is hurt. We share the pain of all these women who resemble us and who are denied, damaged, destroyed in that part of themselves which is their very essence" (Thiam 77). Walker invokes empathy as the core to psychological understanding. Although Raye is a whole woman and as such is self-possessed, her desire to empathize with Tashi and learn from her, rather than simply label her 'different' or 'backwards,' is presented as one of the most important psychological concepts. Empathy is what the 'white witch doctor' lacks. At times, Tashi gains strength from understanding the value of empathy and the community of women

she has around her. At other moments, however, such realizations shake the imagined foundation on which Tashi has built a false sense of security.

For example, Raye introduces Tashi to one of her other patients, Amy Maxwell. The result of their meeting is that Tashi is unable to envision America as a haven where women are free from the fear of mutilation. Amy describes her childhood to Tashi, stating, “I mean, said Amy, sighing, that when I was a very little girl I used to touch myself...there. It was a habit that mortified my mother . . . at six years of age our family doctor was asked to excise my clitoris” (Walker, *Possessing* 185). Tashi is horrified and can only ask suspiciously if New Orleans is, in fact, America. She states, “I don’t believe you, I said, rising to go. For I saw the healthy green leaves of my America falling seared to the ground. Her sparkling rivers muddy with blood” (Walker, *Possessing* 185). Amy provokes Tashi to understand that she is part of a much larger community and history of female suffering. Tashi angrily leaves Raye’s office because she does not want to acknowledge that horrific things like FGC can occur within the one place in which she has found safety. The revelation that excision not only occurred amongst slaves but further that “even in America a rich white child could not touch herself sexually, if others could see her, and be safe,” (Walker, *Possessing* 185) is too much for Tashi to bear.

Tashi’s psychological journey is extensive. It is only as an adult that she is able to recall memories from her childhood, gaining understanding and ultimately acceptance regarding her mutilation. With the nurturing guidance of Mzee, Tashi recalls the true nature of Dura’s death and the subsequent meaning of the circumcision rite. With Raye, however, Tashi learns about the universal suffering of women and is forced to reconcile her own identity, rather than simply change herself depending on where she is or what

she is feeling. Walker invokes Jungian psychology, even introducing Jung as a character in the novel. Although Tashi and Adam affectionately nickname The Old Man, Mzee, Mzee signs a letter to his niece, “Yours in wonder, your uncle Carl,” (Walker, *Possessing* 85) paying homage to the spirit of Dr. Jung. By analyzing the dreams of her unconscious, Tashi begins her journey toward mental health. The archetype of the tower—and all that it represents—eventually provide Tashi with an understanding of what she has endured and what the societal expectation of a woman is. Tashi is thereby finally able to reconcile her identity. Walker makes Tashi’s true identity evident at the end of the novel by combining all of her names before her death, Tashi-Evelyn-Mrs. Johnson. Tashi also recognizes the fact that “Tomorrow morning I will face the firing squad for killing someone who, many years ago, killed me” (Walker, *Possessing* 272). This acceptance, along with all of the other clarity Tashi gained during her psychological journey, allows her to finally let go of her suffering, even if just moments before her death.

## Conclusion

Since *Possessing the Secret of Joy* progress has been made in the global fight to end FGC. There has been increased awareness in the global community as to the atrocities many circumcised women can suffer. Awareness and discussion of what was considered a clandestine practice is an important stride that Walker helped to provoke by detailing Tashi's fictional experience with FGC. It is the first step in ending FGC but unfortunately, there is much more that must be done to eradicate the practice. Walker identified several of the grassroots problems regarding FGC in her novel, including patriarchal society and FGC as a means to dominate women. As many other scholars and activists like Awa Thiam, Shulamith Firestone, Nawal El Saadawi, and Fran Hosken claim, patriarchal dominance must be halted if the mistreatment of women is to stop. Such abuse includes damage to the mother-child relationship, which Walker also highlights in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. As Debold, Wilson, and Malave assert the mother-daughter relationship can revolutionize the role of women and undo patriarchal dominance. In order for this to happen, however, mothers must stop abandoning their daughters' needs, as is the case for Tashi. Tashi's mother relinquishes her daughter to patriarchal society with the hope that she will be able to survive the initiation ceremony and life with her mutilation. The title of this honors thesis: *A Cut That Lasts Forever* attempts to highlight the nature of FGC. The horrors of the initiation ceremony are not ever a distant forgotten memory. The pain of the circumcision can remain with the circumcised girl forever, as is the case with Tashi, whether because of the lasting physical injury or the unhealed psychological wound.

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