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Surviving the Weight of Tradition:

Alice Walker's Possessing the Secret of Joy

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One never asked for fear of the answer.
Alice Walker, *Possessing the Secret of Joy*

If, in the patriarchal system, femininity is defined in terms of lack and absence, in contrast to the male presence, as Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray contend (see Moi for a discussion of Cixous's and Irigaray's work), the presence of the clitoris seems to challenge and endanger that presupposition. The female body may then be manipulated in such a way as to render that threatening presence ineffectual before the phallocentric power. The female body can be inscribed upon, becoming the text written by the male hand. This image of the female body as text reminds us of a well-known African-American character whose body is engraved by the white male and read by others, but not by herself. I am referring to Sethe in Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* (1987). Sethe, Beloved's mother, is "branded" on her back as a sign of possession and property. Her scars are read and interpreted as different shapes or figures by other people.

This article discusses a novel in which we witness another, and even more terrible, example of the female body as text within the narrative text of the novel, (Note 1) Alice Walker's *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992). Walker's political stance is manifest throughout the novel: she is adamant that female circumcision (cutting off the clitoris) is a form of mutilation, and that its existence is inconceivable at the end of the 20th century, even under claims of national and ethnic identity preservation. At the risk of being accused of participating in neo-colonialism, Walker advocates the rights of the female human being above everything else. Thus, I argue that, faced with such a question as "what comes first: feminism/womanism or ethnicity?" or, put in another way, "gender or culture?", the author's choice is clearly stated in her narrative.

The white colonialist created a stereotyped vision of black people, and "failed to see them as human beings who can be destroyed by suffering" (Walker, *Possessing the Secret of Joy* 271). S/he nevertheless kindly granted this downtrodden and dispossessed race the possession of "the secret of joy," which enables it to overcome any physical or psychological suffering. The doubly colonized existence of black women falls clearly within this essentialist categorization: she is allegedly willing and even content in both the colonial and patriarchal systems (Said 207). It is this image of the "exotic" black African woman that is revised and recontextualized by Walker in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. Through the "barbaric" exoticism of such practices as clitoridectomy and infibulation (see below), she presents us with the real suffering and unwillingness of their very victims, as narrated by themselves—although Walker's own voice and political stand are obviously behind them. For Walker, these rituals should not be seen merely as something exotic, but as a projection of the "familiar" Western male dominance and the white man's hunger for colonial conquest. Through these sexist rituals, the female Nature is penetrated, conquered, and manipulated. The black man is colonized by the white man and the black woman is oppressed by the black man. Therefore, she is not only the victim of colonialism but also of patriarchy; so she is the victim of a victim, the slave of a slave. (Note 2)

Walker's characters take it in turns to express their viewpoints related to the main event around which the novel revolves: the trial of a black woman charged with the murder of her *tsunga* or circumciser. Tashi, the protagonist, has returned, from Europe and the United States, to Africa with the only purpose to commit this murder, a symbolic act of rebellion and rejection of what Walker considers to be a form of female mutilation.

Even though the characters are fictitious, they are involved in what is a highly controversial issue nowadays. Infibulation and different types of clitoridectomy are still practiced in some parts of Africa, and there are also cases in Europe, the United States, Central and South America, and Australia, mainly among immigrants from countries where they are a common practice. According to an article published in the February-March 1996 issue of *Amnesty International*, it is estimated that 114 million women were involved in these practices in Africa in 1993. Clitoridectomy consists in the total or partial excision or removal of the clitoris, while infibulation—also called "pharaonic" circumcision—is the suture of the flesh around the vagina after performing clitoridectomy, leaving a small opening for urine and menstrual flow. The girl's legs are tied together until the healing process is complete. The age at which these operations take place is usually between four and eight. These girls are, however, doomed to both physical and emotional ordeals in their future lives. Not only the operation itself but also the lack of antiseptic measures frequently leads to infections, complications at birth and painful sexual relationships. Yet this is the force of tradition, and, as Awa Thiam points out, "ancestral values die hard" (127). This is also the indelible imprint of the patriarchal system on women, whose sexuality and identity are manipulated and

trampled on. “[Infibulation] constitutes the most eloquent expression of the control exercised by the phallocratic system over female sexuality,” and “its sole function is to prevent girls from having sexual intercourse before marriage” (Thiam 60, 72). Clitoridectomy, rather than infibulation, is closely related to religion (see Mbiti 96-102 for an analysis of the religious meaning of clitoridectomy). In the novel we even see how in the Olinka village, where carrying the water and procreation are a woman’s job, the elders see a justification of such ritual in the very beginning of the world by God, who excised or circumcised the Earth before having intercourse with her (174). Just as God could “be excused” for cutting the Earth’s erect clitoris because it resembled masculinity, so could men. This is incidentally a reversal of the Freudian theory of penis envy; the removal of the female genitals can be seen as clitoris envy instead. If “God liked it tight” and it was His wisdom that created the *tsunga* (circumciser), then men must obviously follow suit and be thankful for such a precious possession, the woman, whose body they acknowledge “has been given us to be our sustenance forever” (238). Thus religion is claimed as the ultimate reason for excision and its legitimate justification. (Note 3) Here again Walker’s incisive criticism comes to the fore in the words of one of her characters who states that “Religion is an elaborate excuse for what man has done to women and to the earth” (235)—such assertion works both at a colonial level and a patriarchal one. And men go even further, believing, or wanting to believe, that women are content. The fact is that, in fighting cultural imperialism and trying to revalorize and preserve tradition in a post-colonial context, “the African past ... was made the object of a quest, and the picture of women’s place and role in these societies had to support this quest and was consequently lent more dignity and described in more positive terms than reality warranted” (Petersen 253). (Note 4)

If these ritual practices are performed in the name of tradition and in defense of a tribal or national identity as opposed to colonial or neo-colonial domination, then the problem posed here is twofold: what comes first, culture or gender, decolonization/cultural restitution or female identity? “African cultural values systematically denigrated by colonialist ideologies and institutions demand positive representation, and this restitutive impulse has frequently been seen to conflict with feminist reformation” (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 249). Tashi is at the cross-roads between the two paths, which also appear symbolically represented in her two names—Tashi and Evelyn. On the one hand, she herself chooses to undergo the operation when she is an adult, as the intervention of the African-American missionaries had prevented it in her childhood. And she does it as a sign of loyalty to her people, to her tribe and their much worshipped leader: “We had been stripped of everything but our black skins. Here and there a defiant cheek bore the mark of our withered tribe. These marks gave me courage. I wanted such a mark for myself” (24). On the other hand, when she goes to the United States and after realizing the high price she has to pay in her future life for such a decision, namely reduced sexual pleasure, brain damage for her baby, and abortion, she is determined to mend her mistake, this time by asserting her identity as a woman, and not as a faithful member of the Olinka tribe. Tashi certainly embodies the

contentious relationship between feminism and post-colonialism. (Note 5) Using Morrison's words when referring to Sethe, we can say that Tashi is surely facing "a perfect dilemma" in that she has to balance the pain of ethnic betrayal, on the one hand, and the pain of maimed womanhood and "personhood" on the other.

Tashi is torn between Africa and the United States, her husband's home. Her love for her adoptive country grows to the point of admitting, while she is in prison, that "sometimes I dream of the United States. I love it deeply and miss it terribly, much to the annoyance of some people I know" (55). Her painful process from one side to the other begins with her operations, after which she became "passive," "no longer cheerful," as her friend Olivia notices, and "that her soul had been dealt a mortal blow was plain to anyone who dared look into her eyes" (66). We could say that Tashi dies not only spiritually but also psychologically, for her new condition turns her into a deranged, insane person. (Note 6) In the process, she has to undergo psychiatric treatment for her trauma. Furthermore, the delivery of her baby is another ordeal, not only because of the physical pain, but also because of the atmosphere of curiosity and amazement that her mutilated body creates among the American doctors and nurses, who see her as some kind of exotic otherworldly creature:

> 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. (60-61)

This image of a "creature beyond their imaginings" epitomizes the typical perception of "the other" in the colonizer's eye, an exotic, different, barbaric, inferior other and, in this case, the African other, which is, as Tashi puts it, a "sideshow" (61) for the colonizing, racist and sexist Western world. But it is from this world that Tashi will set out to perform her own ritual of inner liberation, and assertion of her identity and her womanhood.

The circumciser's murder by Tashi is preceded by a well-knitted dialectical confrontation between victim and victimizer. M'Lissa, the old Olinka *tsunga* is aware of Tashi's intentions. Through subtle and witty comments, she tries to dissuade her would-be murderer. Interestingly, the character of the circumciser, which we would think of as the victimizer and manipulator of Nature's designs in the bodies of the little girls, is consciously presented to us as a victim herself, thus adding to Walker's harsh criticism. In an interview with Pratibha Parmar, Walker states:

> I had a moment while I was interviewing a circumciser that was very good for me personally. I had sat there next to her, feeling a great deal of dread and anger and hostility, and there was a moment in which we looked into each other's eyes and I could see her humanity and feel that she was a human being and

> that she had been tricked and indoctrinated and programmed into this line of work. At this point, I sensed the person behind the horrible activity that she is engaged in. (Walker and Parmar 348)

There are therefore two aspects of the figure of the circumciser. One is the outside one, the strong woman who takes on the honorable baton of tradition, handed down to her from the ancestors. The other, the inside one, is the woman who questions the reasons and utility of her practices, but who does not speak out. It is the first one who appears in newspapers and magazines, who is honored by the Olinka government, and visited by politicians and people from churches and schools. But it is the second one who speaks to Tashi, and who also, through a stream of consciousness, "speaks in" what she does not dare to say aloud within the secrecy that surrounds her ritual activities. It is the first woman who talks about her "job" being hereditary and coming from the very time when the Olinka became a people; but it is the second woman who asks "Why did they make us do it?", "Can you imagine the life of the *tsunga* who feels?" (223, 221). Declaring that she had learned not to feel, she painfully admits that, after her own rite of initiation, "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" (222).

Behind this emblematic human national monument are the tears and sadness of someone who seems to possess the secret of joy, in spite of her own maimed body. Much to Tashi's surprise, M'Lissa confesses her disagreement with what she does—and this is not a tactic to distract Tashi and preserve her own life—for she thinks that "when one has seen too much of life, one understands it is a good thing to die" (209). M'Lissa is conscious of the sexist patriarchal system they live in and criticizes their charismatic Leader, who advocates the absolute necessity of the perpetuation of the existing rites of initiation. "Did Our Leader not keep his penis? Is there evidence that even one testicle was removed? The man had eleven children by three different wives. I think this means the fellow's private parts were intact" (244). Finally, there is a short section in the novel entitled "M'Lissa" where her final, heartrending, outcry reveals her unspoken pain. Her subservience to the establishment among her people and to the force and weight of tradition has maimed not only her body but also her mind: "I have been strong ... Dragging my half-body wherever half a body was needed. 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?" (226).

Tashi's criminal act is delayed, but not avoided, by M'Lissa's words. With the act, however, Tashi brings about her own death, as that is her sentence after the trial. There is a parallelism between M'Lissa and Tashi in that both experience a spiritual death while they are physically alive, but when they die, they reach a kind of metaphorical freedom and spiritual life, one because she is liberated from her

emotional burden of silence and the other because her choice gives her a sense of identity she did not have before. For, from saying "I am nobody" (257), Tashi moves onto the reaffirmation of her self immediately before her execution, signing a letter she writes "Tashi Evelyn Johnson, Reborn, soon to be Deceased" (279). Yet, what differentiates the two is the fact that one remains silent to the outside world, while the other decides to speak out against misogyny and oppression, probably influenced by her contact with the United States. M'Lissa's defeat is that she does not leave, even though she admits she herself would have done so if she were not lame (243). Her lameness is both physical and psychological.

Even if there are women, such as M'Lissa, who seem to possess the secret of joy and to be happy with their situation, condoning the sexist actions of which they are victims—and there are many who do not question their internalized subjection to male dominance, there are others who, such as Tashi, know that "if you lie to yourself about your own pain, you will be killed by those who will claim you enjoyed it" (108). Audre Lorde makes the point:

> as we begin to recognize our deepest feelings, we begin to give up, of necessity, being satisfied with suffering and self-negation, and with the numbness which so often seems like their only alternative in our society. Our acts against oppression become integral with self, motivated and empowered from within. (58)

Walker, an African American author writing about female circumcision from the United States, has undertaken a difficult task in creating this novel, which could be read as an example of neo-colonialism from the imperialist West, as it tackles an issue that affects mainly black women in Africa (Kanneh 346; see Bass for an interesting example of criticism against Walker's "imperialistic impulse."). Anticipating possible unfavorable reactions to her novel, Walker argues that traditions and customs are perpetuated to maintain "a sense of cultural nationalism" in pursuit of self-determination; however, exceptions should be made when those traditional practices endanger human health and life. She does not think she is intruding in somebody else's culture simply because those practices do not constitute culture but torture:

> There are people who think that to speak about this is to stick your nose into somebody else's affairs, somebody else's culture. But there is a difference between torture and culture. I maintain that culture is not child abuse, it is not battering. People customarily do these things just as they customarily enslaved people, but slavery is not culture, nor is mutilation. (Walker and Parmar 270)

By writing this novel, Walker speaks out, breaking the web of silence and secrecy that surround female genital mutilation. She explores the intricacies of human nature and the paradoxical relation between the oppressed and oppressors. Circumcisers contribute to the oppression of women in a patriarchal system without realizing it. They do not question the tradition they are perpetuating; all they know is that it is tradition and should be passed on as such. As the mother of a

circumcised child admits, “Our great-great-grandparents used to do it, and we don’t know the reason why, or why we are still doing it and will continue to do it” (Walker and Parmar 323). Therefore, it is not only the circumciser who plays a crucial role in this perpetuation but also mothers, and daughters who, like Tashi, voluntarily submit to this ordeal. However, both Tashi and M’Lissa let out their pent-up feelings about genital mutilation at some point, thus revealing the main purpose of this novel, which constitutes a tribute to the survivors of the weight of tradition.

In conclusion, without dismissing the important role customs play in the preservation and identity of a culture, Walker warns us about the dangers of blindly accepted traditions. If some of these practices jeopardize human life and, in this case, women’s physical and psychological well-being, they should be revised. Pain and suffering have to be articulated; questions have to be asked, and answers have to be provided. Although women usually claim that they have forgotten the terrible pain they felt when they were circumcised themselves, their bodies do not forget and will certainly take their toll, as it happens with Tashi. Therefore, according to Walker, the answer to our initial question is that “woman” comes first; the human being wins over the categorization “African” and whatever clichés it implies. The foundation of joy is in first, fighting with resistance for the spiritual and physical integrity of the human being and, above all, of subjected women, and then, and only then, trying to preserve an ethnic and national identity.

Notes

1 Interestingly, Buckman refers to the female body as “a site of colonization.” In the case of female genital mutilation such colonization is twofold, since “the female body is revealed as a site of male and national colonization” (89).

2 Ironically Walker somehow blames white colonizers for not changing tradition in this case: “The colonizers managed to force people to change many other traditions, but mutilation of girls was clearly not their priority—it seems that colonizers don’t care as long as it is somebody else’s child who is being abused and they get their profits anyway” (Walker and Parmar 275). She also claims that “the British, in this particular instance, were right about stopping this sort of evil thing. But because they themselves were so evil, and the harm that they had done was so great, it was very difficult for African men and women to really choose what they would like to retain of their culture, since the British were so busy destroying everything else” (Walker and Parmar 275). Hence Tashi’s decision to undergo circumcision as a mark of courage and loyalty to her people and her culture, after they have been stripped of everything.

3 Female circumcision is often associated with Islam and seen as a requirement for women to be proper Muslims. However, it is not mentioned in the Holy Koran, as Baba Lee reminds us in an interview with Pratibha Parmar. He claims this practice is in reality "a means of suppressing women" and keeping them subdued to men, all of which is done in the name of religion (Walker and Parmar 326).

4 Here Petersen takes Achebe's representation of women as an example of the traditional vision of the beaten and subjected but happy woman.

5 Even though feminist and post-colonial discourses seek to reinstate the marginalized and oppressed either by gender or race, there are conflicting points between them as I point out here (Ashcroft, Gareth and Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back* 175).

6 For the performance of clitoridectomy as a cure for—but not cause of—women's nervousness, hysteria, insanity and female dementia, see Nobile (223-24).

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