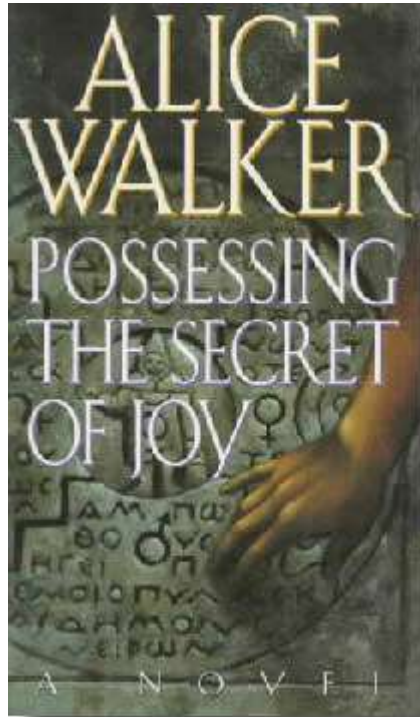


## Scars of Oppression:

Female Circumcision in Alice Walker's *Possessing the Secret of Joy*

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The God Amma, it appeared, took a lump of clay, squeezed it in his hand and flung it from him, as he had done with the stars. 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, although the whole movement was horizontal. The earth lies flat, but the north is at the top. It extends east and west with separate members like a foetus in the womb. It is a body, that is to say, a thing with members branching out from a central mass. This body, lying flat, faces upwards, in a line from north to south, is feminine. Its sexual organ is an anthill, and its clitoris is 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 universe...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. But the original incident was destined to affect the course of things forever...

—Marcel Griaule

**F**emale circumcision, a major theme in Alice Walker's novel *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, is a rite of passage extending far beyond the initiation ceremony. There are three types of female genital mutilation: clitoridectomy, the partial or whole removal of the clitoris in which the bleeding is stopped with pressure or a stitch; excision, where both the clitoris and the inner lips are amputated and the bleeding is stopped with stitching; and infibulation, the removal of the whole clitoris and some or all of the labia minora. Infibulation also includes incisions in the labia majora, done to create raw surfaces, which are either stitched together or kept in contact by tying the legs together as they heal until a "hood of skin" covering the urethra and most of the vagina appears (Toubia 10). In the immediate sense, circumcision can result in infection due to unsterile conditions, an inability to urinate, shock, and damage to the urethra or anus, which may be caused by an inexperienced circumciser or sudden movements by the girl. These complications are compounded in the case of infibulation. The possibility of hemorrhage is greater and, because the wound area is so much larger, so is the risk of infection and abscesses. The girl is less likely to be given any form of anesthesia with infibulation due to tribal customs, so the pain is much more severe. Urine retention is also common since the skin is stitched over the urethra (14). Long-term effects can include "sexual frigidity, genital malformation, delayed menarche, chronic pelvic complications, recurrent urinary retention and infection, and an entire range of obstetric complications" ("Female Genital Mutilation: An Introduction").



In Walker's book, Tashi undergoes infibulation or Type III circumcision. Unlike most of the girls in her village of Olinka, she was not circumcised as a girl because of the death of her sister as a result of complications arising from circumcision. Tashi's mother Catherine was chastised for her decision, as was Tashi. She later tells her American psychiatrist that her friends considered her uncircumcised vagina a "monstrosity," and then "jeered at [her] for having a tail" (Walker 120). The tail remark refers to the belief in many cultures that if it is not excised, the clitoris will "grow to enormous size and dangle between the legs, like a man's penis" (Sexual). Tashi eventually underwent the procedure as a symbol of unity and loyalty to her village and its imprisoned leader. She tells her psychiatrist that she was more than willing to give up sexual pleasure in order "to be accepted as a real woman...to stop the jeering" (Walker 120). She was already considered a possible liability due to her relationship with the village missionaries, and so when the national leader, "Our Leader" as she calls him, said from prison that they "must keep all...[the]...old ways," she went under the *tsunga's* knife (120). This attitude of circumcision as an element of unity is prevalent in countries where it is still openly practiced and accepted. In his book, *Facing Mount Kenya*, Jomo Kenyatta, one of the foremost leaders of African nationalism, details the tradition surrounding the "initiation" of both boys and girls. He writes

that the operation is still "regarded as the very essence of an institution which has enormous educational, social, moral, and religious implications" (Kenyatta). In his native village, circumcision of both sexes is the "deciding factor" in when a child is considered an adult. The initiation ceremonies are considered a way of recording history. He gives the example that if a famine was occurring at the same time as the *irua*, or the rite of passage, then that particular group would be known as the *ng'aragu* or famine group. He believes that without this custom, "a tribe which had no written records would not have been able to keep a record of important events and happenings in the life of the...nation." According to Kenyatta, any person who has not been "corrupted by detribalisation" can remember the entire history of his people through the names of Agu, Ndemí, and Mathathi, who were initiated centuries ago (Kenyatta).

As in many cultures, the circumciser in *Possessing the Secret of Joy* holds an honored place in the Olinka village. M'Lissa, the village *tsunga*, explains to Tashi that "since the people of Olinka became a people there has always been a *tsunga*" (Walker 212). She goes on to tell of her mother, who was a *tsunga* before her. One day when she was still a child, M'Lissa followed her mother into the forest. She watched her take something out of a tree, kiss it, and then replace it. After her mother left, M'Lissa walked up to the tree and unwrapped what her mother had left there. She found a

small wrapped object...took it carefully down into my lap, where I unwrapped it. It was a small smiling figure with one hand on her genitals, every part of which appeared intact. This was before I was circumcised, so with the ready curiosity of a child, I lay right down to compare my vulva to the little statuette's. Hidden behind a boulder, I very cautiously touched myself. The blissful, open look of the little figure had aroused me, and I felt an immediate response to my own touch. It was so sudden, so shocking and unexpected, it frightened me. I hastily rewrapped the little figure, placed it back in its niche, and ran. (213)

She tells Tashi that she never again touched herself, for if she had, then "at least I would have known the experience that the work of the *tsunga* was trying to prevent." When it came time for her own ceremony, her mother, recognizing the pain she would be inflicting upon her, tried to leave a "little nub, down there where the charge I had felt with the little statuette had seemed to be heading" (214). The other women saw what she was trying to do, and "what my mother started, the witchdoctor finished...I could never again see myself, for the child that finally rose from the mat three months later...was not the child who had been taken there. I was never to see that child again" (214-5). As a *tsunga*, she had to learn "not to feel" in order to perform her tasks (214).

M'Lissa was always admired for her role in the village, but especially so after the liberation wars. She was "honored" by the Olinkan government for "her unfailing adherence to the ancient customs and traditions of the Olinka state"; her attendant tells Tashi that M'Lissa is a "national monument" (147, 150). In most countries, this type of village midwife performs circumcision (Lightfoot-Klein 36). Some exceptions occur in northern Nigeria, where barbers perform the surgery; in northern Zaire, where the traditional circumciser is a male "priest"; and in Egypt, where both traditional midwives and barbers perform it. In the more urban settings, and particularly among the wealthy, doctors or trained nurses now perform the procedure in a "clinic-like setting, under sterile conditions, using anesthesia. Although this appears on the surface to be

a far less dangerous and more humane way of performing these operations, [it] is reported that when anesthesia is used, more tissue is apt to be cut away, as the child tends to struggle less” (36).

Several health issues can arise after the circumcision. Intercourse is difficult to achieve for many couples, as it was for Tashi and her husband Adam.

So this is how there could have been an immaculate conception, he'd said bitterly, when I told him I was pregnant; meaning it literally...after three months of trying, he'd failed to penetrate me. Each time he touched me, I bled. There was nothing he could do that did not hurt. (Walker 59)

The birthing process is difficult for most circumcised women; in her book, *Nine Parts of Desire*, Geraldine Brooks explains “women with scar-constricted birth canals suffered dangerous and agonizing childbirth” (Brooks 34). The child of a circumcised mother is also affected. Benny, Tashi's “radiant brown baby,” is born retarded, a “small but vital part of his brain crushed by our ordeal” (Walker 60). It is also believed that the AIDS epidemic in Africa can be partially linked to circumcision. Olivia, Adam's sister, talks of how “Tashi is convinced that the little girls who are dying, and the women too, are infected by the unwashed, unsterilized sharp stones, tin tops, bits of glass, rusty razors and grungy knives used by the *tsunga*. Who might mutilate twenty children without cleaning her instrument” (247). Walker interviewed a circumciser in her documentary, *Warrior Marks*, and asked her about the precautions she used to avoid “infection.” The circumciser, whom Walker picked because of her apparent belligerence and unwillingness to listen, explained that she boiled the instruments in water, dried them, and put them back in the package. She buys a new package of blades for each ceremony and uses one blade for two children (Parmar 314-6). The documentary also contained an interview with Dr. Henriette Kouyate, a gynecologist based in Senegal, who speaks of her conviction that there is a link between AIDS and circumcision, namely

communal circumcision: the circumciser has her own blade, she cuts and passes from one child to the next with the same blade, soiled with blood, the hands soiled with blood. So it's evident that if she is a carrier of AIDS, if she cuts herself she can transmit the disease. Or if one of the children being circumcised is a carrier she can transmit it. (297-8)

Lightfoot-Klein also connects the two, believing that prostitutes who have been circumcised pose the greatest risk (Lightfoot-Klein 240). She says that “somewhere in the chain of circumstance female circumcision plays its role” in the spread of the AIDS virus (242).

Unlike most women in her culture, Tashi had experienced sexual pleasure before her initiation. She tells her psychiatrist that she “always” experienced orgasm and practiced masturbation and oral sex, both taboos in her culture, prior to her circumcision. Adam, son of the village missionary and her lover and eventual husband, remarks, “my tongue brought us no babies, and to both of us delight...this way of loving, among her people, [was] the greatest taboo of all” (Walker 28). The village was steeped in superstition, going so far as to believe that making love in the fields would cause the crops to fail. Adam describes this belief as “the strongest taboo...no one in living memory had broken it...it was declared that if there was any fornication

whatsoever in the fields the crops would not grow." No one ever saw them, and "the fields produced their harvests as before" (27). Women in Olinkan culture were expected to be sexually passive and to suppress any sexual desires. This, in fact, was the primary reason for the procedure. In her article, "The Sexual Experience and Marital Adjustment of Genitally Circumcised and Infibulated Females in the Sudan," Hanny Lightfoot-Klein discusses how women are "assumed to be (by nature) sexually voracious, promiscuous and unbridled creatures, [and] morally...weak" (Sexual). In a culture where the honor of a family is measured largely by the "virtue and chastity of its women," the physical suppression of a woman's desire in order to preserve her purity is seemingly an almost natural step. Geraldine Brooks explains this as an attempt "to lessen or destroy sexual pleasure" and, as a result, "lessen temptation" (Brooks 37). Nahid Toubia claims "although nearly all societies subjugate women in some way, FGM [female genital mutilation] is the most drastic measure taken by any society to control women's sexuality and reproduction" (Toubia 18). Lightfoot-Klein defines the role of the female in these societies as "one of total submission to the man, and her behavior must at all times reflect extreme modesty, unassailable chastity, and a virtual withdrawal from the world outside the home" (Sexual). A tight circumcision is regarded as highly desirable, and many women, after being cut open in order to go through childbirth, opt to be resealed as before. Lightfoot-Klein explains that this stems partially from a fear that without a "tight repair" (Sexual), a woman will eventually become sexually unattractive to her husband. When Tashi returns to Olinka to visit M'Lissa, she angrily reminds the *tsunga* of the words she spoke to generations of Olinkan women:

...you taught them this...it is what you told me. Remember? The uncircumcised woman is loose...like a shoe that all, no matter what their size, might wear. This is unseemly...unclean. A proper woman must be cut and sewn to fit only her husband, whose pleasure depends on an opening it might take months, even years, to enlarge. Men love and enjoy the struggle. (Walker 216-7)

Since Islamic culture permits multiple marriages, the idea of having to share not only a husband's sexuality, but also his usually limited financial resources, is enough to convince a woman to undergo the painful procedure and subsequent attempts by the husband at penetration time and time again (Sexual).

While discussing "Our Leader," Tashi mentions how he said, "no Olinka man...would even think of marrying a woman who was not circumcised" (Walker 120). In a culture where a woman's sole purpose is to be a wife and mother, this is a very convincing reason to be circumcised and to make sure that one's daughters are also. According to Lightfoot-Klein, "without circumcision, a girl cannot marry and is thereby unable to fulfill her intended role, i.e., to produce legitimate sons to carry on her husband's lineage" (Lightfoot-Klein). The procedure is so ingrained in the society, that myths concerning uncircumcised women have been accepted as truth. Tashi says that "everyone believed it, even though no one had ever seen it...no one living in our village anyway...and yet the elders, particularly, acted as if everyone had witnessed this evil, and not nearly a long enough time ago." Despite her earlier sexual experiences, Tashi tells her psychiatrist that her own body was a "mystery" to her (Walker 119). Along with the belief that a woman's clitoris will grow like a man's penis and make penetration impossible, there is also the myth that "if a baby's head touches the uncut clitoris during birth, the baby will be born hydrocephalic (excess cranial fluid)." It is also believed that if a man's penis touched the clitoris,

he would become impotent. Excuses regarding health are also given; it is believed that infibulation prevents uterine prolapse, or the falling out of the uterus (Similarities).

Circumcision is also used as a method of exclusion, both of outsiders and the uncircumcised members of the tribe. Tashi speaks of how the missionaries spoke out against such traditions as circumcision and facial scarring, and the Olinkas would give them their "mumbled prayers and conversions," but continue the practice of their ancient customs because "Our Leader" deemed it necessary (Walker 116). When Adam comes for Tashi, M'Lissa tells him that Tashi wanted to be circumcised "because she recognized it as the only remaining definitive stamp of Olinka tradition" (63). The procedure itself is a secret known only to the circumciser, an occupation passed down from generation to generation. When asked by Alice Walker in the documentary, *Warrior Marks*, about the methods used, one circumciser refused to reveal any part of her practice, including what she carried in her bag or "calabash." She states that "even the girls that are circumcised, they don't know what is in it...[or] what she uses...it's a secret, and it's a secret society. It's not to be revealed to anyone" (Warrior). Tashi subconsciously adheres to this belief when she describes Raye, her African-American psychiatrist:

I was reminded of a quality in African-American women that I did not like at all. A bluntness. A going to the heart of the matter even if it gave everyone concerned a heart attack. Rarely did black women in America display the graceful subtlety of the African woman. Had slavery given them this? (Walker 117)

She does not consider the fact that her upbringing in a culture that purposely held women back resulted in this "subtlety" and passiveness, not the doctor's lack of these qualities.

Any woman who fights against the tradition is chastised and often punished for her independence. M'Lissa warned Tashi's mother against her decision not to have her circumcised, and Tashi herself was often teased for her unutilated body. In her documentary, Alice Walker interviews Aminata Diop, a woman who fled her native Mali to avoid circumcision and sought political and religious exile in Paris. When she told her mother that she did not want to be circumcised, her mother was "ashamed and couldn't go to the mosque...[she] cried for days." She says that her mother "advised me to submit to it, as she had done, but I couldn't accept that" (Parmar 255-6). She explained to her daughter that a woman "has to go through three ordeals in life...excision, marriage, and giving birth. Excision is a woman's destiny" (257). Diop was able to avoid circumcision until it was arranged for her to be married, when she then explained to her father and fiancé that she did not want to be excised at all. Her father "did not accept it" and, consequently, physically and verbally abused her in public (258). Her fiancé "didn't try to understand it" and told her that he "could not be proud of a woman who would be dirty, who would be like a whore, and he would be ashamed...he abandoned me" (259). She moved to France, and after several months learned that her father had divorced her mother, who was later forced out of the village. Everyone believed that her mother had helped her, that "only a bad mother could have given birth to such a bad girl" (259).

Tashi eventually moves to the United States, and it is here that she becomes pregnant with her son Benny. The thought of giving birth frightened Tashi—"having experienced the pain of getting Benny 'up in there,' we were terrorized waiting for his birth." Not only did she have the

fear of the pain involved, but the local medical community was amazed at her situation. She talks of the “quick-stepping American nurses looking at me as if I were some creature from beyond their imagination” (Walker 59). The doctor offered to do a Caesarian section on her, but she did not want to even consider being cut again. After the birth, there was “the question of what to do with ‘the hole’...my doctor sewed me up again, much as I’d been fastened originally, because otherwise there would have been a yawning unhealable wound” (Walker 59-60). The question of how to deal with circumcised women is a topic under much debate in the medical and counseling professions. Until a few years ago, very little was officially done to cater to the special needs of these women. There are several stories of health professionals “misdiagnosing FGM as genital deformity.” This was not helped by the “natural tendency of immigrant and refugee communities to be uncertain and reserved in their dealings with health professionals.” Several clinics and outreach programs have recently been set up to “meet the needs of a growing population of women who have experienced female genital mutilation.” There is still the question of how to delicately approach the issue in order to find out whether a woman has been circumcised. Once this has been established, pregnant infibulated women are often encouraged to be defibulated in order to reverse the genital mutilation, solving the medical aspect but not the social stigmas related to the issue (“Female Genital Mutilation: Female Circumcision”).

Alice Walker says in *Warrior Marks* that she wrote *Possessing the Secret of Joy* as a method of seeing the “ways in which the women are rather routinely mutilated in most parts of the world and how people tend to think of the pain done to women as somehow less than pain done to men” (Parmar 267). She claims to have made a very strong connection to the idea of these girls being hurt while everyone else was “making merry” (268). The novel was her attempt at capturing this emotion. While it occasionally lapses into the type of self-pity often associated with this genre of work, it effectively portrays the agony of a woman trying to accept herself as three different women: one who is an outsider in her own community, another who is just like the others but recognizes the consequences of blind submission, and one who, finally, must resign herself to who she is in a world that cannot fathom what has happened to her.



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## **Biographical Sketch**

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