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THE WHIRLPOOL OF PAIN IN ALICE WALKER'S *POSSESSING THE SECRET OF JOY*

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ABSTRACT

Gender identities and gender relations are determined by the culture of a society. Culture makes gender roles meet certain inescapable beliefs, assumptions, expectations, and obligations. Gender politics camouflaged by cultural norms and governed by patriarchal interests and manifested in cultural practices like female genital mutilation, make the life of women difficult and burdensome. Alice Walker's fifth novel *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992) discusses a tabooed cultural practice called female genital mutilation, camouflaged by gender politics, that is used to subjugate women, to protect the interests of men. Female Genital Mutilation is a painful procedure considered to be a mark of true womanhood in certain cultures. The procedure involves excision of parts of the female genitalia for non-medical reasons. This paper focuses on how the whirlpool of pain created for women under patriarchy in the name of cultural loyalty to practices like female genital mutilation, devours the lives of many young girls and women, and stresses on the definite need to put an end to it. Walker through the novel has put forth hope that there are certainly ways and means to put an end to the whirlpool of pain reserved for women by men.

**Key Words:** Gender, Culture, Women, Female genital mutilation, Taboo, Whirlpool

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Gender identities and gender relations are determined by the culture of a society. On account of cultural influences, gender roles are institutionalized and enacted at the levels of the family, community and society. Culture makes gender roles meet certain inescapable beliefs, assumptions, expectations, and obligations. Cultural practices are treasures of a social group as they are a mark of their identity and assertion. Moreover, certain cultural practices are gender specific and are mandatory marks of a particular gender. Moreover, there is a lot of meandering in the name of culture that goes into the making of women by patriarchy, as "**One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman**" (Beauvoir 295). Gender politics camouflaged by cultural norms and governed by patriarchal interests and manifested in cultural practices like 'Female Genital Mutilation' or FGM, make the life of women difficult and burdensome. Alice Walker's fifth novel *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992) discusses a tabooed cultural practice called female genital mutilation, camouflaged by gender politics, that is used to subjugate women, to protect the interests of men. Walker

through the novel has put forth the idea of Judith Butler of how **“gender is performatively produced and compelled by regulatory practices of gender coherence . . . constituting the identity it is purported to be.”** (34)

In the novel *The Color Purple (1982)* Walker has made a passing reference to a “bloody cutting around puberty” (Walker *Color* 237) performed on young girls, which is to be proscribed, but is considered as the prerequisite for womanhood. Nevertheless, she hasn’t discussed it at length, in her Pulitzer Prize winning 1982 novel. This indicates Walker’s interest in creating an awareness for the eradication of female genital mutilation as early as 1982. Walker has discussed and protested against female genital mutilation vehemently with her vanguardal voice, in her 1992 novel *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. In fact, the main agenda of the novel is eradication of female genital mutilation. Walker wanted the world to know about the horrific repercussions a woman is made to face, after undergoing the procedure. Walker in an interview with David Bradley has inspiringly said : **“I was brought up to try to see what was wrong and right it. Since I am a writer, writing is how I right it. I was brought up to look at things that are out of joint, out of balance, and to try to bring them into balance. And as a writer that’s what I do. . . ”** ( 370). She has stood by what she has asserted, when she has condemned female genital mutilation through *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. Walker wrote the entire novel, based on the life experiences of women characters maimed and unmade by female genital mutilation, to create an awareness about the hazardous effects of the practice on women, which is highly commendable.

Female genital mutilation is a painful procedure considered to be a mark of true womanhood in certain cultures, for women. The procedure involves excision of parts of the female genitalia for non-medical reasons. There are three main kinds of female genital mutilation **“Sunna is the procedure where the prepuce (wood) or tip of the clitoris is cut. Excision involves removing the entire clitoris and all or part of labia minora. Infibulation is the scraping away of the entire external genitalia-the clitoris, labia majora and labia minora”** (Mak 10). Of the three aforesaid procedures, infibulation is the most serious form of female genital mutilation, as the external genitalia are almost scraped away and **“the normal urinary and vaginal openings are replaced by small openings in the sealed scar. . . . the opening must be enlarged for sexual intercourse . . . [and even] childbirth”** (Sanderson 13-16). As a cultural or religious practice it is performed predominantly in the northern half of Africa, parts of the Middle East, certain parts of Asia, in several tribes in South America and Australia, and among immigrants from these areas who have settled elsewhere.

Female circumcision as a cultural practice is considered as a passport for a girl to enter womanhood and wifehood. In cultures where it is practiced, it is considered as a mark of inviolate virginity, as the procedure is performed on girls who haven’t reached puberty. Moreover, the obligatory procedure promises young women, marriage, children and economic stability, which uncircumcised or un-infibulated women can never have. The harmful after-effects of female circumcision are blood poisoning, death due to haemorrhage, painful periods, urinary infections, urinary incontinence, blood poisoning, pelvic inflation, painful intercourse, recurrent vaginal injuries in sexual acts due to the procedure. Another terrible malady that pervades the procedure is the prevalence of Human Immuno Virus that leads to AIDS or Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome, due to the use of unsterilized instruments in the procedure and recurrent injuries in carnal acts due to the procedure. Walker through the novel has showcased how the existence of an infibulated woman is engulfed in a whirlpool of pain, due to the aforesaid harmful after-effects, from which she can never come out. Moreover, pain becomes an indispensable, tacit part of her existence till her death, after infibulation, which she is forced to hide from the world.

The novel *Possessing the Secret of Joy* depicts the problems associated with cultural heritage, and shows how culture shapes gender identities and gender relations in a society. This paper concentrates on the tremulous aftereffects of female genital mutilation on the lives of women, their families and societies, where it is practiced under patriarchal tutelage. Walker through the novel has shown, how patriarchal culture finds ways and means, to spread itself in a globalized world. Walker in the preface to the novel has used a quote from African folk culture absolutely congruent with the theme of the novel, which succinctly states that: **“When the axe came into the forest, the trees said the handle is one of us”** ( Walker *Possessing*). Through

this quote, Walker hints at how women are made into pain inflicting tools, to pain fellow women, at the behest of patriarchy. In a patriarchal society, women have less personal autonomy, fewer resources at their disposal, and limited influence over the decision-making processes that shape their societies and their own lives. The novel drives home the point that cultural practices initiated and constructed by patriarchs, dictate women's lives, and make their practice essential for their survival. Walker has vehemently spoken against the unethical practice of female genital mutilation even in her non-fiction work titled *Warrior Marks: Female Genital Mutilation and the Sexual Blinding of women (1993)* and the film documentary called *Warrior Marks (1993)* in which she has collaborated with Prarthiba Parmar. Walker through the three aforementioned endeavours has put forth a brave foot forward by speaking against fundamentalists who support and spread female genital mutilation with full throated ease, which is highly laudable.

Walker through the protagonist Tashi, and other women characters like M'Lissa, Mbatl, Ayisha, Dura Nafa and Amy Maxwell, has shown what circumcision does to the lives of women. This paper particularly concentrates on the protagonist of the novel Tashi, and showcases how she is sucked into a whirlpool of pain unwittingly, unaware of the repercussions of the infibulation undergone by her. The novel follows the life of Tashi, the protagonist of the novel from her childhood to death. It showcases the life cycle of an infibulated woman and the various difficulties she is forced to face on being infibulated, at different stages of her life. Tashi undergoes psychological and emotional scarring on account of the physical scarring undergone by her. She undergoes the procedure willingly, only to have no appreciation for it later on, as any other woman. This paper focuses on how the whirlpool of pain created for women under patriarchy in the name of cultural loyalty sucks into it, more and more young girls and women, and stresses on the definite need to put an end to it.

Walker through the novel has stressed on the fact that women need to debunk traditions and myths that shackle and do no good to them. In an interview with Paula Giddings, she has stressed on the fact that women are forced to follow traditions that they haven't created. She has contemptuously said : "**Ninety-nine and ninety-nine and one-hundredths percent of traditions should be done away with because women did not make them**" ( Walker *Essence* 102). Walker through her works has condemned such traditions, and through the novel, has depicted that female genital mutilation is one such tradition, that should be done away with. Walker through the novel has showcased how women are proselytized to accept such traditions in the name of cultural integrity, ethnic oneness, and as the mark of a community. As an innocent and ignorant young woman "Tashi was happy that the initiation ceremony isn't done in Europe or America, . . . That makes it even more valuable to her" ( Walker *Color* 202). Moreover, in Olinka, Tashi's mother land, circumcised women are honored and valued as female circumcision is a mark of a true Olinka woman. Walker through the novel has showcased how naïve young girls are lured into the whirlpool of pain with promises of happiness forever, along with gifts and appreciation, to have no appreciation for the practice later on.

Walker through the novel showcases how women in a patriarchal society willingly get their daughters circumcised and nothing is spoken of the repercussions of the procedure, or even the possible death associated with it. A mother is both willingly and unwillingly ready to hand over the '**continuum of pain**' (Walker *Possessing* 165) to her female child. A circumcised or infibulated woman unwillingly sucks her child into the same whirlpool of pain knowing fully well that, her daughter's life will be a repetition of hers, after the procedure. Walker through the novel projects how handling down the legacy of pain and unwittingly pulling the female child into the whirlpool of pain are considered to be acts of communal wellness, and cultural loyalty. **Walker here endorses the view of Pollock that: "Pain is the only reality, yet the actuality of this pain must be constantly hidden, thus denying reality"** (Pollock 38). Walker through the novel depicts how speaking about pain undergone by women is made a taboo by cultural norms as the "**the performative construction of gender within the material practices of culture**" (Butler 35), is solely stressed upon by patriarchy to uphold male domination.

Walker through the novel dexterously comments on the plight of a mother in preparing her daughter to undergo female genital mutilation even if it may be life threatening, as in the case of Dura, Tashi's dead elder sister. Dura dies due to profuse bleeding on account of her haemophilic condition. Nafa, Tashi's mother does not make Tashi undergo the procedure due to Dura's death, but Tashi gets it done to avoid jeering of fellow

women, under the influence of patriarchal leaders who encourage the practice. Walker through the instance of Dura and Nafa drives home the idea that, a mother handing over the legacy of pain should be viewed as one who unwillingly prepares the lambs for slaughter, due to sociocultural reasons. **Walker here endorses the view of Gruenbaum who has said that female genital mutilation “forms part of a complex sociocultural arrangement of female subjugation in a strongly patrilineal, patriarchal society. . . . women who carry out the practice, and who are its strongest defenders, must be analysed in terms of their weaker social position” (5).**The ever sucking whirlpool of pain is created for women by men who are strong defenders and bankers of the upper hand of patriarchal interests. Women are but tools and pawns, who espouse such decrees.

Walker through the novel has shown that infibulation is a negative life changing process through the instance of Tashi. Infibulation has its toll on Tashi's body and mind. She turns into a dull, sullen, morbid person from the joyful, ever smiling, buoyant person she has been. On account of infibulation undergone by her, menstruation, urination, love making, and child birth become indescribable ordeals. Moreover, she faces depression for a lifetime, as she is physically and psychologically violated by infibulation. Walker through Tashi's character has showcased how marital bliss of women is tarnished for ever because of the procedure. Tashi ceases to be Adam's once prized lover. Their relationship turns out to be only compassionate friendship, and everything conjugal about it dies a bitter death owing to the frequent vaginal bleeding of Tashi, due to the procedure. In due course of time, Adam enters into an extra marital relationship with a French woman called Lisette, and begets a son called Pierre through her. This further worsens the condition of Tashi and she fails to co-operate with her psychiatrists and becomes sadomasochistic. Nightmarish dreams of Dura's circumcision, which she has had secretly watched as a child, pester her day and night. She senses violence rising in her. She exclaims: "I felt violence rising in me with every encounter with the world outside my home. Even inside it I frequently and with little cause, no cause, boxed Benny's ears. If I made him squeal and cringe and look at me with eyes gone grave with love and incomprehension, I fancied I felt relief" (Walker *Possessing* 142). The violence and neurosis in Tashi are an outcome of her vulnerability and victimization under patriarchal norms. Walker by showcasing Tashi's fractured being, not only through her, but also through the other characters in the novel, has showcased how infibulation can be an instance of life regression, fracturing the body and spirit of the infibulated.

In cultures where female genital mutilation is practiced, women are made to believe that **“Infibulation purifies, smoothes, and makes clean the outer surface of the womb, the enclosure of the home of childbirth, it socializes or culturalizes a woman's fertility” ( Janet Boddy696).** However, no one talks about the terribly painful child birth an infibulated woman is forced to undergo, than an un-infibulated woman. Moreover, after delivery, a woman is re-infibulated to reach her former stage, to please the man in her life. The worst of all is the fact that the, vagina of an infibulated woman is tightened and loosened according to the demands of a man, at the expense of the tear of her flesh, as well as the smear and flow of her blood. Walker through the character of Tashi has clearly shown how difficult, taxing and draining, giving birth to a child is, for the infibulated. Through the character of Benny in the novel she has showcased how infibulation can create lacunae for life in a child, during child birth, because of its infibulated mother. Bentua Moranga or Benny, Tashi's son, turns out to be a special child, as his brain gets damaged during her complicated delivery, on account of circumcision,. Benny's condition as a special child, and her own ebbing psyche make her an unconcerned mother, taking away the joys of motherhood from her, forever. The wrench and terror faced by Tashi during her delivery make her avoid conjugal life altogether, and she decides never to have a child again. Walker through the novel, has portrayed how motherhood becomes a terror and an unwanted experience for women, owing to cultural marks like female genital mutilation.

Walker through the novel has depicted the plight of circumcisers like M'Lissa, who are but tools in the hands of patriarchy. Tashi in her middle age, kills her circumciser M'Lissa or Mama Lissa in utmost outrage for having nipped her physical wholeness and psychological well-being. Furthermore, Tashi detests the fact that M'Lissa has been made a national icon of Olinka, for passing on the patriarchal tradition of female genital mutilation. She puts an end to the life of M'Lissa with razors and blades, akin to the instruments she has used

to infibulate her. This act of Tashi, has to be viewed as outright defiance, and as an attempt to put an end to, at least one continuum of pain, instituted to maim women like her. Tashi sees M'Lissa as the villain of her life, and the slayer of the lives of many girls through circumcision. **Lovalerie King commenting on this symbolic act has rightly stated that: "By killing the tsunga, Tashi (as representative African woman) symbolically breaks the tradition that stood between her and wholeness. Walker uses the subject to illustrate the continuum (through time and space) of physical and spiritual damage that a single harmful act sets in motion" (242).** Tashi by breaking the tradition does not get her physical wholeness, but gets great mental relief which accelerates her spiritual re-birth. She realizes that M'Lissa and *tsungas* or circumcisers of her sort, are a mere extension of male power in a patriarchal society.

Walker through the novel has emphasized how women are never allowed to know their bodies, and explore their sexuality outside male gaze. Moreover, *tsungas* who know the significance of the excised female genitalia never speak up for themselves or other women, as they too are under patriarchal diktats. Walker through the novel has further delineated how *tsungas* like M'Lissa are forced to be torturers of young children. Mama Lissa acquiescently says: "But who are we but torturers of children?" (Walker *Possessing* 219), nonetheless is equally helpless than being a collaborator with patriarchy. All the women in her family have been *tsungas*. M'Lissa tells Tashi that her mother has tried to save her from being completely infibulated, knowing the importance of the excised parts, but has been caught doing so. She tells how it led to an infibulation that has made her lame forever. M'Lissa wonders "Why did they make us do it? . . . I never really knew" (Walker *Possessing* 216). However much she tries not to feel like a torturer, she inadvertently turns out to be an instrument, in creating the whirlpool of pain in the name of female circumcision for young girls. Tashi questions M'Lissa, why she never told her about the plight of a circumcised woman, "About the pleasure she might have. Or the suffering" (Walker *Possessing* 217). M'Lissa answers Tashi saying "I thought you were a fool, . . . The very biggest" (Walker *Possessing* 237) when asked to be circumcised. The aforementioned lines showcase how women undergoing infibulation are unaware of what is happening to their bodies. As Karla Simcikova pointed out: **"It is precisely this lack of knowledge about their own bodies that helps women into accepting positions as living objects" (32).** Women who are aware of the damage that is done to their bodies never speak about it, as it is a taboo to talk about the procedure. Due to this, the whirlpool of pain engulfs more women and young girls into it.

Walker through the novel has disclosed the psychological manipulation reserved for women to accentuate male experience and desire. M'Lissa considers women to be fools who need no encouragement to be circumcised, as they are only bent on pleasing men. She tells Tashi "But women, . . . women are too cowardly to look behind a smiling face. A man smiles and tells them they will look beautiful weeping, and they send for the knife" (Walker *Possessing* 238). Walker has cleverly shown how women knowing nothing about their bodies are made to bear pain and discomfort associated with the procedure for years together. Moreover, M'Lissa's subtly jibes on the sexual politics involved in the procedure when she says: "It is only because a woman is made into a woman that a man becomes a man. Surely you know that!" (Walker *Possessing* 241). Furthermore Walker through her words strengthens the patriarchal diktat thrust on the female sex that a woman has **"to enjoy only vaginal sexuality"** with a man. (Bettelheim 252-254). Walker through the novel has shown how female genital mutilation makes a woman **"a vehicle by which the male's sexual enjoyment is made paramount"** (Olayinka Koso-Thomas 9). Walker through the different women characters in the novel has showcased how women in making a man's pleasure insurmountable are undone on the physical, emotional and psychological planes forever.

Walker through the talk between Tashi and Amy Maxwell a minor character in the novel has showcased how patriarchal distortion of women's being, spreads amidst other cultures of which it is not a part. Through the instance of Amy Maxwell in the novel, she has disclosed how the whirlpool of pain is familiarized in cultures where it is unknown, at the behest of patriarchy. Moreover, she has showcased western silence and curiosity regarding such procedures thrust on women through the aforementioned instance. Tashi's acquaintance Amy Maxwell, a white girl, too faces the cruelty of female genital mutilation due to her mother who has been psychologically manipulated under patriarchal gender norms. Amy tells Tashi

that, she has been circumcised at the directive of her mother who wanted her daughter to have a gentle spirit, like her circumcised black friend Gladys. This interest of Amy's mother is an illustration of the manacles reserved for women by patriarchy. Walker through the novel has strictly condemned such manacles and psychological manipulation reserved for women. Amy tells Tashi "I was to be controlled all my life, . . . by my mother's invisible hand"(Walker *Possessing*187). Amy longs for wholeness she once had, but has lost it after circumcision. Amy tells Tashi that even "in America a rich white child could not touch herself sexually, . . . and be safe" (Walker *Possessing*185). She tells how Infibulation interested American doctors and how "they wrote in medical journals that they'd finally found a cure for the white woman's hysteria" (Walker *Possessing*186). Walker through the novel argues that female genital mutilation should be seen as an act attenuating and killing female sexuality. Furthermore, Walker through the novel has shown how cultural practices and cultural space both shrink and expand with globalization, and gendered cultural practices like female genital mutilation are even put to use, to subdue women, by various cultures of which they are not a part. Walker through the novel has successfully shown how patriarchal norms and values when internalized by women, spread around the world at a faster pace.

Walker through the novel has showcased the fact that, there is hope for women to be whole without being circumcised or infibulated even in cultures where it is practised. Tashi wishes freedom from female genital mutilation for other women. Tashi dotes on Mbat, representative of the modern Olinka woman, as she sees in her the daughter she could have had after Benny, but could not, on account of the trauma of circumcision. She gives Mbat the female fertility doll, named Nyanda with intact genitals as a present, to her would be daughter. Pointing to the fertility doll, Tashi tells her "I could never have that look of confidence. Of pride. Of peace. Neither of us can have it, because self-possession will always be impossible for us to claim. But perhaps your daughter [ . . . ]" (Walker *Possessing*271). Before her death she writes to dead Lisette about how her mother became a stranger to the being of her daughters. Tashi wonders at the unpalatable truth of how her mother: "sunk into the role of 'she who prepares the Lambs for slaughter' " (Walker *Possessing*273). Walker through the novel asks women to come out of the roles of lamb slayers and welcome life in totality for their daughters. Walker in the novel questions the ethics of patriarchal hegemony that make every woman hand over a legacy of pain to her daughter. Seeing women supporting her, Tashi expects that things would change in Olinka, at least by the time Mbat would have a daughter. She hopes that future generations of women would have the autonomy of their bodies and being. Tashi by presenting the fertility doll with intact genitals, certainly breaks a cultural tradition, and restores an old pre-patriarchal tradition that advocates wholeness for women.

Walker by bringing into focus the whole woman doll named Nyanda in the novel, and making Tashi gift it to Mbat has put forth the idea that, there can be an end to the whirlpool of pain. Tashi tries to re-establish a pre-patriarchal tradition that does not support female circumcision. As remarked by Maria Lauret **"The novel tries to preserve a delicate balance between representing the sexually mutilated woman as a victim on one hand, and as a survivor who decides to act in her own cause on the other" (164)**. Tashi has been sucked into the whirlpool of pain as a young woman and the rest of her life remains a perpetual struggle. She cannot come out of pain, but her life and death create an awareness about female genital circumcision. Olinkan Women come together to defy the death sentence conferred on her. Tashi by the end of the novel realizes that "RESISTANCE IS THE SECRET OF JOY!" ( ). Just before Tashi's execution Mbat, Olivia, Benny, Pierre and Raye unfurl a banner with the words "RESISTANCE IS THE SECRET OF JOY!"( ). to create an awareness about resisting the procedure. Tashi once has had the secret of joy and her wholeness, but she has given up her joy to a traditional practice in the name of culture is male dominated and biased. She has voluntarily ended up her joy, by sticking to the procedure. Resistance here refers to the fortitude of mind, spirit and body, that would bring about positive change in one's life. Tashi comes out of pain after being executed and her soul says "I am no more. And satisfied."

Walker through the novel proffers the questions on whether a circumcised, or infibulated woman can offer any healing to her daughter. Beyond this, the prime issue raised and discussed trenchantly by the novel is whether a circumcised, or infibulated woman can stop herself, from handing down the legacy of pain.

Walker's avid response to the issue discussed in the novel is that, resistance to the procedure is the secret of joy. Walker through the novel, reiterates the fact that unless, mothers resist violence through procedures like female genital mutilation, there cannot be freedom for their daughters. She asks women, to resist moves of patriarchy that are meant to undo them. Walker does not totally condemn mothers for dragging their daughters into the whirlpool of pain, as she has depicted their helplessness and the psychological manipulation undergone by them.

Walker through the novel has put forth bright hope for women that there are certainly ways and means to put an end to the whirlpool of pain reserved for women by men. She has fervidly spoken against thrusting performative femininity, on to the body of a female child through female genital mutilation, as it is more a girl child rights issue and a human rights issue, than a mere cultural practice. She has brought into focus the fact that girls and women can lead a better and happy life without this performative gender identity. Walker through the woman characters who have undergone female genital mutilation in the novel, has depicted that women who have undergone circumcision cannot come out of the whirlpool of pain, but they can certainly come together and put an end to it, for future generations of women. She asks women to come together to put an end to the pain in the lives of women unmade by patriarchal cultural norms. She asks women of the present and earlier generations to put a brave foot forward to stop the gamut of pain. Walker through the novel endorses and advocates stopping the spread of the whirlpool of pain, associated with female genital mutilation reserved for women.

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