

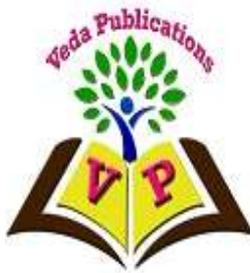


## GENDER POLITICS AND WOMEN IN ALICE WALKER'S *POSSESSING THE SECRET OF JOY*

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### ABSTRACT



Culture does not only mean the material, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual traits of a social group, as it includes knowledge, beliefs, arts, customs, practices, habits, and values acquired, made and rehearsed by a social group over a period of time, both indigenously and cross-culturally. Culture dictates the attributes and behavioral patterns of men and women, their relationships with each other and gender norms of many a society. On account of cultural influences gender roles are institutionalized and enacted at the levels of the individual self, family, community and society. Some cultural practices are a mark of self-identity and are gender specific tools of self-assertion for a social group and are a passage to manhood and womanhood. The present paper discusses how gendered practices like female genital mutilation are deeply embedded in gender politics and are used in the making of weak women. Gender politics camouflaged, governed and trusted by patriarchal interests and patriarchal gaze thrust through practices like female genital mutilation, make the life of women, extremely cumbersome. Walker through the novel *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992) has put forth the view that the female self is made to be the silenced other, forcibly according to patriarchal whims and conventions to accentuate men's interests alone through practices like female genital mutilation. This paper posits three women characters in the novel Tashi, Ayesha and Amy Maxwell of three different races and ethnicities who are oppressed by female genital mutilation of different sorts. It contends that unless and until women develop womanist consciousness that makes them know how they are limited through racist, sexist and classist means, they can rarely come out of cultural practices like female genital mutilation that limit them on all fronts. This paper advocates resistance and a vehement refusal to clitordectomy and infibulation and a whole-hearted welcome to life, longevity and wholeness to overcome gender politics that derail women from progress of all sorts.

**Keywords:** *Culture, Female Genital Mutilation, Clitordectomy, Infibulation, Womanhood, Resistanc, Wholeness.*



The word culture has been defined in many ways by many critics and scholars. Deborah L. Best in *"Cross-Cultural Gender Roles"* has defined culture as "A dynamic system of rules encompassing attitudes, beliefs, norms, social organizations and practices presumably related to human behavior and personality development that are shared by groups of people" (279). Patricia Welehan in *"Cross-Cultural Sexual Practices"* defines culture as "The learned intra and inter-generationally shared pattern and values without passing judgment on them." (291). Yet, culture does not only mean the material, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual traits of a social group, as it includes knowledge, beliefs, arts, customs, practices, habits, and values acquired, made and rehearsed by a social group over a period of time, both indigenously and cross-culturally. Culture is made by society and individuals both together and individually too. Culture is never static as it keeps on changing with time, keeping safe, certain aspects of old times. Cultural changes occur as communities and households respond to social and economic shifts associated with globalization, new technologies, environmental pressures, armed conflicts, development projects, etc. However, cultural changes occur at a slower pace as culture is an intrinsic and indispensable fabric of a social group. Cultural values and norms in certain social groups act as variables regarding gender equality affecting gender roles played by men and women. As pointed out by Hawley "Culture forms a central locus for understanding the character of contemporary reality for a number of reasons" (216) as it influences people who constitute the society they live in tremendously. Culture dictates the attributes and behavioral patterns of men and women, their relationships with each other and gender norms of many a society.

Gender refers to the social roles and relations between men and women, including behavioral patterns, work done, and decisions made. "Gender identities and gender relations are determined by culture" (Dhavaleswarapu 553). On account of cultural influences gender roles are institutionalized and enacted at the levels of the individual self, family, community and society. "Culture makes gender roles meet certain inescapable assumptions, expectations, and

obligations" (Dhavaleswarapu 553). Some cultural practices are a mark of self-identity and are gender specific tools of self-assertion for a social group and are a passage to manhood and womanhood. Culture is not only mark of a social group, but it is a tool used by patriarchy to tame the female sex and make them women according to societal standards to privilege women. As pointed by Simone De Beauvoir in her seminal work *The Second Sex* "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (295). The present paper discusses how gendered practices like female genital mutilation are deeply embedded in gender politics and are used in the making of weak women. Gender politics camouflaged, governed and coerced by patriarchal interests and patriarchal gaze thrust through practices like female genital mutilation; make the life of women, extremely cumbersome. The novel puts forth the view that "Sex is understood to be the invariant, anatomically distinct and factice aspects of the female body, whereas gender is the cultural meaning and form . . . the body acquires and the variable modes of that body's acculturation . . ." (Butler 35). Walker through the novel has put forth the view that the female self is made to be the silenced other, forcibly according to patriarchal whims and conventions to accentuate men's interests alone. A woman's body that is whole and hers is made into something that is un-whole and incomplete on account of cultural practices like female genital mutilation.

Walker's novel *possessing the Secret of Joy* published in the year 1992 is a serious deliberation and discussion on the limitations imposed by female genital mutilation as a cultural practice that undoes women on many planes. It discusses how it limits the sexual facets of sex, gender, sexuality and the intersection of these variables in a woman's life. Walker has discussed and protested against female genital mutilation vehemently with her vociferous stance against the practice. Walker in her essay "Saving the Life That Is Your Own: The Importance of Models in the Artist's Life" has written: It is, in the end, the saving of lives that we writers are about . . . . We do it because we care . . . . We care because we know this: the life we save is our own." (*In Search* 14) Walker has stood by her stance when she boldly spoke against female genital mutilation through her



fictional works *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, and *The Color Purple* 1982 and non-fictional work *Warrior Marks: Female Genital Mutilation and the Sexual Blinding of women* (1993) and the film documentary called *Warrior Marks* (1993). She spoke across boundaries and cultural spaces to discuss a tabooed woman's rights issue called female genital mutilation. Beyond it, she has participated in events that raised awareness about female genital mutilation in America. She indeed faced severe criticism when she spoke about an issue outside her cultural space, which she does not fully understand and has never undergone. Walker severely opposed it saying that it is an important woman rights issue and that she cannot be quiet when her black sisters are tortured in the name of a cultural ritual that demolishes their total wellbeing and, and treats them as vestiges of patriarchy especially through clitoridectomy and infibulation the other variants of female genital mutilation. A woman's body that is hers and is not hers makes her question her identity on all planes.

'Female Genital Mutilation' also known as FGM, is a painful ritual and procedure considered to be the true denotation of true femininity and womanhood in certain cultures. It thrusts upon young girls and women as the ultimate mandatory process that makes the female sex women in due course, conferring on them religious and matrimonial sanctity. As a ritualistic practice safeguarding vaginal virginity, it is practiced in many countries in Africa, Asia, Middle East, America, South America, and Australia. The ritualistic procedure involves excision of parts of the female genitalia for non-medical reasons. There are three major kinds of female genital mutilation called as sunna, clitoridectomy and infibulation, of which infibulation is the most serious procedure. In Sunna the clitoris is given a cut, while in clitoridectomy, also known as excision, the clitoris is totally excised. In infibulation, the vaginal lips are cut away the vagina is made extremely small rather constricted 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 ). In severe cases of infibulation the woman who has undergone the procedure acquires a slant gait. The worst aspect

and facet of life associated with female genital mutilation is that it has led to rampant spread of HIV, AIDS, and other blood borne diseases like wild fire, when prophylactic and aseptic measures are not practiced. Some other repercussions of female circumcision are blood hemorrhage, blood poisoning, painful periods, varicose veins, urinary infections, urinary bladder problems, blood poisoning, pelvic inflammation, painful sexual life, recurrent vaginal fissures during vaginal sex, and prevalence of AIDS or Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome. Despite the terrible shortcomings associated with the procedure, it is seen as an essential aspect of womanhood, and the pain associated with it is silenced and is kept aside as a taboo and is shown as a blessing showering upon them womanhood, marriage and motherhood.

*The novel Possessing the Secret of Joy* deals with the problems of cultural heritage, and shows how culture shapes gender characteristics and gender relations in a society. This paper concentrates on the legacy of pain handed down to women in a patriarchal world, in the name of culture even in the modern globalized world, amidst patriarchal tutelage undermining the interests of women. This paper discusses 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 that states that: "When the axe came into the forest, the trees said the handle is one of us" (Walker *Possessing Preface*). Through this quote, Walker hints 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 economic and social resources at their disposal, and limited influence over the decision-making processes that shape their societies and their own lives. It has to be noted that societal constrictions and gender constrictions go into the making of gender norms, values, and men and women in many a patriarchal society. Cultural practices initiated and constructed by patriarchs dictate women's lives, and make their practice essential for the survival of women as they are economically and socially marginalized.

In a globalized world, culture spreads like wild fire when cultural practices that benefit interests either good or bad are famous and can be used to



stay put people in different ways. Infamous cultural norms used to subjugate women are spread by patriarchy in different cultural arenas when they are used to support men and their interests. "Globalization refers to the ways in which previously distant parts of the world have become connected in historically distant parts of the world have become connected in a historically unprecedented manner such that developments in one part of the world have become connected in a historically unprecedented manner, such that developments in one part of the world are able to rapidly produce effects on geographically separated localities" (Hawley 209). Owing to globalization, oppressive ritualistic procedures like female genital mutilation, foot binding, neck binding, breast flattening, lower lip plating are unwittingly popularized by a very small minority who use such ritualistic procedures of the aforesaid sort to pervade many parts of the world to oppress women and accentuate interests of men and patriarchy. This paper concentrates on how black, coloured and white girls and women face the ruckus and aftermath of female genital mutilation and the gender politics involved in passing on the legacy of pain from one generation another. This paper puts forth how tools like female genital mutilation that are used to subjugate women, become ubiquitous tools of torture for patriarchal goons of different races and ethnicities. This paper posits three women characters in the novel Tashi, Ayesha and Amy Maxwell of three different races and ethnicities who are oppressed by female genital mutilation of different sorts. Tashi an African and later an African American and Ayesha of Middle East descent belong to cultures where female genital mutilation is observed, while Amy Maxwell is a European, forcibly subjugated to ritualistic female genital mutilation though female genital mutilation is not a part of her culture. It projects how women are psychologically manipulated by patriarchy to undergo the procedure much beyond their will not knowing the ramifications of the procedure. Walker through the novel has shown how patriarchy "encourages males of all races and classes to define their masculinity by acts of physical aggression and coercion towards other women and children" (Hooks 148). At times, such women become tools inflicting pain on fellow women

much to their displeasure. The novel concentrates on the mutilating effects of female genital mutilation on the lives of several women characters in Africa, Asia, and America who share a legacy of pain, in the name of female genital mutilation. Through their broken lives, and families, Walker has shown how the female sex is subjugated to keep the vested interests of men alive. This paper argues that Female genital mutilation especially clitoridectomy and infibulation do no good to women on any plane, but they rather make lives of women life unwholesome, and painful. It argues that female genital mutilation can never be equated to male circumcision where an unwanted bit of skin is removed from the body, as it does not affect a man's body negatively.

Tashi comes to America after getting infibulation done on her as a young woman owing to nationalistic feelings. As a young woman Tashi undergoes infibulation with pride not knowing what is in store along with it. Moreover, "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) In Olinka, Tashi's mother land, a microcosm of Africa, created by Walker, circumcised women are honoured and valued as female circumcision is a mark of a true Olinka woman. The strife, pain and violence imposed on women by patriarchal diktats is not talked of, and is made unknown by patriarchy as female circumcision is the most quintessential virtue of womanhood for them. Tashi's life in 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. Mothers on account of the patriarchal norms dictated by society are both willingly and unwillingly ready to hand over the legacy of pain to their female child and slay their well-being mercilessly along with patriarchy. A woman in such a society never speaks about her pain, like her mother and hands down the painful legacy to her daughter, like her mother who has handed it down to her. Walker through the novel projects how handing down the legacy of pain and taking it as token of femininity, is considered to be acts of pride and honour. For clitoridised and infibulated women: "Pain is the only reality, yet the



actuality of this pain must be constantly hidden, thus denying reality" (Pollock 38). Walker through the novel argues why women should be in a state of delirium where they have "to suffer, to die and not to know why" (Walker *Possessing* 230) (*Emphasis Mine*). Tashi's elder sister Dura dies after undergoing mandatory infibulation despite being a haemophiliac.

Walker has showcased the plight of a mother in preparing her daughter to undergo female genital mutilation even if it is life threatening as in the case of Dura, Tashi's dead elder sister. For women like her mother Nafa, marriage is more important than life, education, vocation or anything else, as marriage is deemed to be the best vocation for women on account of their race, class and gender. In Olinka, a microcosm of Africa created by Walker, women believe that marriage is the best vocation and female genital mutilation is a passage to marriage, love sex, motherhood and economic freedom. Women are psychologically manipulated to believe that "Marriage is not only honourable career and one less tiring than many others. It alone permits a woman to keep her social dignity intact and at the same time find sexual fulfillment as loved one and mother" (Beauvoir 307). Mothers lay their daughters as sacrificial lambs to cultural procedures like female genital mutilation as their foremothers have laid them, keeping the rut and rammel of it a secret till experienced. This paper argues that handing down a legacy of indefinite strife and pain in the name of culture has to be done away with, for the upliftment of women when it is not prescribed by any humane religion, except for merciless patriarchy and its many multifaceted wings. "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 handing 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"(Dhavaleswarapu 555).

Walker through the novel has shown that infibulation and un-wholeness are closely associated with each other. She has clearly depicted that female genital mutilation influences the body, mind and soul of a person negatively. On the physical plane the

woman who undergoes the procedure becomes a turf of pain owing to constant menstrual problems, recurrent urinal infections, recurrent vaginal tearing, difficult child birth or still child birth. On the psychological plane she unwillingly becomes a sadomasochistic female constantly experiencing pain and cringing for happiness undergoing bouts of depression. On the emotional plane, she experiences immense emotional lacunae owing to self-abnegation being an object of patriarchal gaze and male desire with unfulfilled desire and the pain associated with sexual desire. In psychologically weak women, as portrayed through the characters of Ayesha and Amy Maxwell, the devastating effects of infibulation lead to unwanted, hastened deaths much before time after having led to un-wholeness for a major part of their lives.

Tashi experiences morbidity in her life and sexuality after undergoing the procedure as she undergoes the procedure as an adult after having experienced her sexuality with Adam her lover-husband. The abyss visible in her eyes after having undergone the corollary of the procedure is symbolic of the deterioration and dilapidation of her life on the personal, emotional and psychological planes. Having had, unusual monthly periods for more than two weeks, and peeing for more than a quarter hour for every single session of urination, experiencing an unusual delivery that leaves her child's brain damaged, Tashi understands that her decision to undergo the procedure is entirely wrong and that the pain associated with it is the worst kept dark secret of patriarchy and its implementing goons. She bemoans her own decision and undergoes psychotherapy for decades to come out of the recurrent psychological trauma, she battles with for a lifetime. This paper argues that women are psychologically and emotionally manipulated to undergo female genital mutilation keeping the upshot of the procedure a tabooed secret. The ruckus created by the procedure might seem to be a small cultural issue to some, but the aftermath that makes men supersede many women and take over power in a society, is rarely considered as the worst aspect of gender politics though it is the most important one that makes or breaks things. Adam and Tashi somehow make a damaged baby but can



never rehearse the same love making they once had at their beck and call. Regret for having been the progenitor of a special child devours her daily inside out, but she can do nothing about it. Her son's life becomes a daily nightmare. Recurrent vaginal tearing makes her life a sore on the physical, psychological and emotional fronts. Marital discord becomes a part of her daily life. On account of multiple psychological aberrations and coming in and out of Waverley, Tashi understands that her life has been unmade by patriarchy and that she has been psychologically manipulated to undergo the procedure.

Though Tashi has none to confer the legacy of pain on to, she senses the need to be a savior of young women who undergo such pain. Moreover, the violence in her raises to the level where she wants to avenge the psychological manipulation thrust on her. She goes to Olinka to kill the mother circumciser called M'Lissa who propagates and advocates infibulation. She slyly kills her with razors and blades the same tools she has had used to mutilate her, rather infibulate her as a young woman. M'Lissa rather feels happy for having been killed by her as she believes the patriarchal dictum that it is a boon to be killed by the one she has infibulated. She reasons that it was her livelihood and that she has had no qualms infibulating young women and girls slyly, as she too has undergone the same pain with no one to save her. She calls Tashi a fool to have trusted her and dies. Tashi faces trial in Olinka, for having killed a national icon, who propagates patriarchal diktats. *"By Killing the tsunga, Tashi (as representative African woman) symbolically breaks the tradition that stood between her and wholeness" (King 242).* Tashi by killing her avenges on the infibulator who has harmed her, but gets caught and faces trial and is sentenced to death. M'Lissa's death purges her off her hysteria and masochism to a greater extent but does no greater good to her, as her life becomes a burnt out case.

Ayasha, a secondary character in the novel is of Asian descent and Islamic origin. Infibulation of the utmost sort is performed on her as a young girl without any information about what would happen later on. After the procedure she neither has a clitoris nor a normal vagina, but a tiny aperture for a vagina and a sealed scar. As cattle sold away, she is

hooked rather married to an old man old enough to be her father. As flesh traded, she finds razor sharp blades beside her nuptial bed that make her realize that infibulation is no small thing that can be dealt with easily, as she has to be cut open on her nuptial night. When she runs away on her nuptial night and says no to her husband Torabe, she is cast away as an outcast and is killed. Ayasha's parents and her family are ostracized by their community for having borne a child who flouts patriarchal diktats and hegemony. Ayasha dies very young having experienced pain for a major part of her life. She leads an un-whole life as she unknowingly and unwittingly becomes a scapegoat after having undergone infibulation. Walker through the instance of Ayasha a secondary character in the novel questions why a circumcised or infibulated woman, is kept away from the truth "about the pleasure she might have or the suffering" (Walker *Possessing* 217).

This paper argues that severe clitoridectomy and infibulation are kept as tabooed secrets to help accentuate male rule and desire for the survival of patriarchy as an institution controlling many women like Ayasha, Tashi, and Amy Maxwell on the physical, emotional and psychological fronts. Women are pitted and used like tools against women spoiling wellbeing and wholeness of one another. M'Lissa tells Tashi "I thought you were a fool, ...The very biggest." (Walker *Possessing* 237) when asked to be circumcised. Words of mother circumciser of Olinka M'Lissa: "It is only because a woman is made into a woman that a man becomes a man. Surely you know that!" (Walker *Possessing* 241) are a testimony to the fact of how patriarchal gender politics are embedded into women's minds through women. M'Lissa after having kept the taboo, a taboo for umpteen women, considers women to be fools who need no encouragement to be circumcised and infibulated. 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).

This paper argues that women's desire to stop the gamut of pain through female genital mutilation has been encoded through the whole clay doll named Nyanda with intact genitals in the novel, suggestive of the fact that women tried to encode



their dismay to the taboo through “a pre-patriarchal art which has been down by generations of women” where “daughters are able to imagine an alternative culture, even though they are confined in a society where they become the mothers who enforce the tradition of female genital mutilation on their own daughters” (Gaard 88). This paper argues that wholeness as a possibility is brought into the purview of women through an alternative culture that is handed over by women through a lucky charm like toy called Nyanda. Despite the concerted efforts of women to claim wholeness the possibility of wholeness is shrouded by the taboo upheld by patriarchs. Walker argues that, unless activism is brought into the lives of women circumcised and infibulated in the name of culture, a positive change can rarely happen in their lives. Tashi is put on a trial and is sentenced to death for killing M'Lissa. Many women's groups and organizations come forward to rescue her, but none succeed in doing so as patriarchal diktats rule the roost. Olinkan women are attacked and driven away by “cultural fundamentalists” (Walker *Possessing* 191) on holding small protests expressing their willingness to end the procedure. Walker has argued that there is a possibility for change when women come together and put an end to procedures that harm their well-being.

Tashi and women like her wail that they “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). Yet Tashi like other women understands that “her own mother was also mutilated, and that part of her own healing involves understanding and forgiving her mother for being an unwilling participant in patriarchal culture” (Gaard 87). Walker argues that women need to put in collective action to stop the gamut of pain. The resistance offered by young women in Olinka is a testimony to the fact that young women have come forward for a positive change asking in for removal of the procedure. Young women protest against the procedure “holding aloft their girl babies and exposing their unaltered genitals on the day of Tashi's execution” (Walker *Possessing* 280). Though Tashi is no more, she has helped other

women garner the strength to protest and overcome the continuum of pain by questioning male authorities. Walker as an author has raised awareness about female genital mutilation around the world through the novel by presenting the psyches of women of different ethnicities and races, who have undergone the procedure to showcase the ill-effects of the procedure.

This paper argues that gender politics prevailing in patriarchal societies aim at bringing in power and hierarchal status to men and subjugating women both covertly and overtly. Various methods like stoning, beheading, severing body parts through practices like female genital mutilation, clitordectomy, binding body parts through Chinese foot binding to limit free movement of women, using Neur neck plates to inhibit neck movement, lip plates to bind lips have been used by patriarchal goons to subjugate women on the physical front as well as emotional and psychological fronts. A woman's body is subjugated to extreme pain to privilege men and give them the main lead and curbs power from all sides and marginalize them and make them subjects of a different sort, the silenced sort. This paper contends that unless and until women develop womanist consciousness that makes them know how they are limited through racist, sexist and classist means, they can rarely come out of cultural practices like female genital mutilation that limit them on all fronts.

Walker, through the novel, has written about the acquiescence between the body and spirit of a woman, and has argued that a tortured and tormented body in the name of culture cannot sustain happiness and wholeness. Walker in *Anything We Love can be Saved* has righteously stated that “Culture is something in which one should thrive, the body and spirit simultaneously” (53). Furthermore, she has shown how procedures like female genital mutilation undo women on all planes and never let the body, mind and spirit thrive together. Through the novel, Walker accentuates reclaiming “women's natural right to the pleasures and wholeness of their own bodies. . . .” (Gaard 92) and in turn repossessing their spirit and the ultimate secret of joy. This paper advocates resistance and a vehement refusal to clitordectomy and infibulation and a whole-hearted



welcome to life, longevity and wholeness to overcome gender politics that derail women from progress of all sorts.

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