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**Possessing the Secret of Black Womanhood: Reading
African Women in Alice Walker's *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, *The Color Purple*,
and *Warrior Marks***

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Abstract

Speaking for or about others has featured consistently in current feminist debates as it is becoming clear that the assumed homogeneity of women within social groups is not realistic. It has become clear that difference can no longer be analysed in terms of race, gender and sexuality alone. Other factors such as history, nationality, and culture demand more attention than they have been previously accorded, which makes many alliances across national boundaries subject to redefinition and reconceptualisation.

This thesis looks at the attendant dangers of ignoring the differences within alliances based on race and gender. I analyse Alice Walker's representation of African women and female circumcision in her novels *Possessing the Secret of Joy* and *The Color Purple* and her documentary film *Warrior Marks* and its accompanying book of the same name the text, to argue that when national and cultural differences are sacrificed for sisterhood and solidarity based on a superficial universalisation of racial and gender oppression, the totalising, discursive tendencies that many critics objected to in second wave mainstream feminism are replicated. Walker differentiates between African women as objects of her discourse and the Western women as its audience. In her representation of Africa and Africans, particularly African women, she is not self-reflexive enough to explore the impact of her ideological location in the West on her identity. Thus, she does not create enough distance between her cultural and ideological upbringing to be able to escape the charge of ethnocentrism.

Because she reads African women from her location in American culture, her work is best read within the African American literature on Africa and Africans dating back three centuries. That the sisterhood that Walker's work advances between African American and African women is informed by unequal power relations between the West and Third World is made clear by her deployment of her womanist ethic in two of her novels, *The Color Purple* and *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. A comparison of the two novels shows that Walker overemphasises the differences between Africans and African-Americans in order to assert the superiority of African American identity to African identity. From her politics in both these novels it becomes clear female circumcision provides Walker with an opportunity to air her Africanist/neo-colonialist attitudes. Her texts on African women, in *Possessing the Secret of Joy* in particular, evinces her indebtedness to the imperialist tradition of writing about Africa as it is a projection rather than a perception. And like most imperialist texts, it tells us more about her pathologies and obsessions as a representing subject than about the Africans she seeks to portray. The position that she creates for herself in the novel is problematic because it is predicated on the essentialist notion of race and gender, and on a slippery identification process that casts her as both subject and object.

This thesis does not look at the practice of female circumcision in Africa, but at Walker's representation of the practice. This is mainly Walker's representation of Africans is part of a larger discourse on African women: for Walker female circumcision provides vehicle for her to participate in this discourse.

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Introduction

One of the issues that plagues feminist politics today is that of speaking about, for, or to, the Other. This is because, even if feminism requires some women to speak on behalf of others, such acts of representation are fraught with problems, as who speaks and who is spoken about or for has depended largely on other categories such as power, race, class and sexuality. In fact, much of what has been written about mainstream feminism's privileging of experiences of white middle-class women as experiences of all women, and its assumptions about all women who are not white and middle-class, has had to do with representation; how mainstream feminists (often homogenised as Western feminists) have represented themselves and Others. Some self-labelled Third World theorists such as Chandra Mohanty, Uma Nayan, Cherri Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua,¹ among others, have emphasised the importance of recognising the ethnographic diversities of different women's realities because intersections of race, class, power and sexuality continue to create problems for categorising of gender. They have also pointed out the dangers of ignoring the historical, cultural and political contexts when formulating theories about women. But even if we feel that such criticisms of mainstream feminism's omissions have run their course, the politics of solidarity persist within feminism. The need to institutionalise difference still exists due mainly to the power of the collective voice; therefore representation continues to cause problems. Further, the crisis of representation that afflicted mainstream feminists when confronted with difference seems to have expanded to the categories Third World women and black women as some Third World

¹ See for instance Mohanty's classic essay "Under Western Eyes" and Uma Nayan's *Dislocating Cultures* and *This Bridge Called My back: Radical Writings by Radical Women of Color* eds. Gloria Anzaldua and Cherri Moraga. 1983. New York: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press.

and Black women ignore the differences within the category black women, and proceed to speak as if they are speaking for all black women, when they are in fact speaking for only a few. The difficulty lies in how groups such as Third World women, women of colour, and African women and Africana women are defined; what it means for one to speak as a Third World woman or a women of colour et cetera.

In her essay, “The Problem of Speaking for Others” Linda Alcoff identifies two widely accepted claims relating to speaking for others. The first one concerns the relationship between location and speech – that the position from which one speaks affects the meaning of one’s speech. Therefore where one speaks from “has an epistemically significant impact on that speaker’s claim and can serve either to authorize or disauthorize one’s speech” (1994: 287). This is perhaps the reason why most critics tend to leave their identities and locations visible. For example Chandra Mohanty in her introduction to a volume of essays by Third World women writes

I [also] write from my own particular political, historical, and intellectual location as a third world feminist trained in the U.S., interested in questions of culture, knowledge production, and activism in an international context. (1991: 3)

Whether such acts of self-identification are always possible is debatable, as it is now commonly understood that identities are fluid. But it is clear that such acts are necessary, because for instance, in Mohanty’s case, by foregrounding her position within the category Third World women she ensures that the meaning of what she says is not separated from the conditions that produce it. She also acknowledges the difference within Third World women, and this anticipates her definition of Third World women as “imagined communities of women with divergent histories and social locations” (1991: 4).

The second claim that Alcoff identifies is that power relations make it dangerous for a privileged person to speak for the less privileged because that often reinforces the oppression of the less privileged since the privileged person is more likely to be listened to. This means that when a privileged person speaks for the less privileged, she is assuming either that the other cannot do so or that she can confer legitimacy on his or her position. Such acts do “nothing to disrupt the discursive hierarchies that operate in public spaces” (1994: 4). Most of the criticism against mainstream feminism has pivoted on these two claims. First of all, that when Western women speak simply as women, without specifying their location (white middle class women) the meaning of what they say is often misunderstood and taken out of its context as representing all women. And second, that when Western feminists take up the cause of Third World women they reinforce the subjugation of Third World women by denying them the right to articulate their own problems.

These two claims also inform my criticism of Alice Walker’s representations of African women and female circumcision in her fictions and documentaries. Her work provides examples of the kinds of distortions and erasures that occur when cultural and national differences are sacrificed for racial unity. I try to show that by ignoring geographic and cultural differences, and focusing on what she perceives to be common interests, Walker silences those for whom she purports to speak. My contention is that the binary opposition that we often employ when we speak of Third World women and Western feminism is predicated on the notion of absolute or essentialised racial identities. The common assumption is that only white middle class women make up what we call Western feminism, and they are therefore the only ones guilty of the aforementioned

colonising and totalising tendencies or that all black women are equally victimised by what we call Western feminists. I therefore characterise Walker's problem as that of location rather than race, and argue that, as a cross-cultural representation, her texts on female circumcision do not successfully negotiate the gap between the two worlds that they deal with – Africa and America – but subjugate one to another.

Many critics have accused Walker in her campaign against female circumcision, particularly in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, of cultural imperialism, and that accusation relates to her claim of two mutually exclusive positions. First she claims an African self, and maintains that in speaking for African women she is speaking for herself, because of her African ancestry. In the second, she claims her Western privilege and casts herself as a philanthropic Westerner who intervenes on the other's behalf. The first claim obscures Walker's ideological upbringing, allowing her to judge and moralise about what she views as African culture, from an inside position. The point, I want to argue, is not whether she is really an African or not because, as Christopher Miller points out:

The fact of being biologically or culturally African neither guarantees nor necessarily permits any sort of purely authentic "African" reading, in relation of total oneness with its text or with Africa itself ... The question thus becomes a practical one of establishing guidelines for a kind of reading that lets the Other talk without claiming to be possessed of the Other's voice. (1986 282)

Because she claims to be 'possessed of the Other's voice' Walker ignores the voices of the women she represents. As the subject of her own discourse she does not need to justify her intervention. She also uses this position to disguise the imperialistic nature of her representation. When she claims an African identity, she obscures the power dynamics that make her intervention possible, and downplays the extent to which her intervention empowers her. After all, as Gayatri Spivak points out in her seminal essay

“Can the Subaltern Speak” such interventions – rescuing colonised women from their culture – have always been crucial in justifying colonialism as a civilising mission. According to Spivak, “imperialism’s image as the establisher of good society is marked by the espousal of the woman as *object* of protection from her own kind” (1988: 299). Disguised as an African woman speaking for her own kind, Walker attempts to rescue the African woman from her culture.

The first chapter of this thesis deals with this ideological cross-dressing. In “Making Postcolonial/Postmodernist Sense of Alice Walker’s Africanist Representation of Africa and Africans in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*” I analyse the representation of Africa and Africans in *Possessing the Secret of Joy* in light of the guidelines that Miller refers to in the above quotation. I reject, as Miller does, the idea of an organic relationship between the text and the reader – the native-knows-the-scene argument – and argue instead in terms of location. I suggest that Walker relies on imperialist discourse on Africa for her representation of Africa and its people, particularly gender relations. Walker’s intervention has little to do with those on whose behalf she intervenes, and a lot to do with her location and identity in her own society. Thus Walker’s text on Africans cannot be read separately from other African American texts on the continent. Her narrative strategy in *Possessing* – particularly her use of postmodernism and postcolonialism – reflects her intention to politicise and problematise history in order to re-articulate African-American identity.

Reading Alice Walker in her location in American society entails an examination of her womanist theory because it came out of her identity struggles as an African American woman in a society dominated by white culture. The second chapter,

“Audacious Women and Wilful Victims: a Womanist Reading of *The Color Purple* and *Possessing the Secret of Joy*,” thus examines Walker’s womanist vision in both these novels. I argue that when womanism is deployed as a multicultural and transnational doctrine that liberates all women, or all “Other” women from various manifestations of patriarchy, erasures and distortions result. Like feminism, womanism needs specific contexts in terms of history, culture and national boundaries in order to make sense as an epistemology. And that by failing to take into account the cultural differences between African nation states and America, Walker’s womanism, as a representational strategy in both novels, falls into the same trap of feminism, that of imposing one way of reading social relations.

Finally the last chapter, “Creating Global Identities: The Body as Identity in *Warrior Marks*” looks at the body politics of Walker’s campaign against female circumcision to argue that in *Warrior Marks*, the documentary text on which Walker collaborated with Pratibha Parmar, their reading of African women and their bodies evinces the same kind of ethnocentrism that Walker decried in white feminist scholars. With her representation of the African woman’s body, she does not account for the different meanings that different cultures attach to the body. In the both the film and the text, Walker and Parmar draw heavily from suspect literary genres like non-fiction travel writing, colonial literature and early anthropological writings to achieve the same ends as these discourses: to claim moral superiority and therefore the right to demand that the (colonised) Other should change.

Chapter One

Making Postcolonial/Postmodernist Sense of Alice Walker's Africanist

Representation of Africa And Africans In *Possessing The Secret Of Joy*

Africa has figured in the African-American literary imagination for over two centuries. In fiction, poetry and other writings, African-American writers have explored their African heritage and its impact on their cultural identity. This exploration of their African ancestry is always linked to their location in American culture. That is, most African-American writings on Africa have been ways of dealing with, or even resisting white American culture by creating an alternative culture and value system for African-Americans or investigating a possibility of one. However, this does not necessarily entail positive representation of Africa; instead most African-American writers have, at best, been ambivalent about their relationship to Africa, and at worst, negative in their portrayals of the continent and its peoples. This is because the presence of Africa in African-American literature has always been inextricably linked to the representations of Africa in the dominant white American culture. Therefore during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when Africa was depicted in white American discourse as a place of barbarism, savagery and paganism, many African-American writers distanced themselves from the 'dark continent,' although some, while not embracing the continent or disputing such images saw hope for the continent. From Phillis Wheatley, and George Moses Horton, to W. E. B. DuBois and Countee Cullen, to Keith B. Richburg and Alice Walker, Africa has meant many different things, all of them tied to prevalent images of Africa in mainstream American discourse.

In this chapter I explore the meanings that Alice Walker attaches to her African origins in her novel *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, her use of her African ancestry to legitimise her reading of Africa in general and the situation of African women in particular. By trying to occupy both the subject and object/other positions in her representation of African women and female circumcision in *Possessing the Secret of Joy* she enters the discourse on Africa from what Christopher Miller (1987) has termed an Africanist perspective. This is not to question Walker's legitimacy as an African-American writing about what she perceives to be an African tradition, but to examine her ideological location vis-à-vis the object of her representation.

The question of who the legitimate African writers are or what constitutes African literature, or who is qualified to write about "African traditions" is redundant, mainly for two reasons. The first is that the idea of an authentic African, unsullied by contact with the West is no longer tenable or realistic, if it ever was. Secondly, as Miller argues in his essay, "Theories of the Africans," ancestral kinship or ideological contiguity notwithstanding there cannot be a "purely authentic 'African' reading" because any contact with African literature will always be mediated by the colonial practice of anthropology (1986: 282). The first step of my project therefore, is to locate Walker's text within the longstanding literary tradition of African-American writing about Africa. Then, following Miller, I will characterise Walker's standpoint as Africanist even as I identify the politics of her text as both postmodernist and postcolonial in its use of history, culture and language. It is my contention that with the space she claims for herself in the African literary canon and her construction and use of blackness in the novel, Walker problematically transgresses the boundaries of race, culture and

nationality. Although defining a text as both postcolonial and postmodernist can be doubly difficult because both terms defy simple categorisation (they are not easy to periodise, and are applicable to virtually anything), I hope to tease the two apart only to show their co-existence in Walker's text.

What is Africa to me?: Constructing ethnicity out of blackness in African-American literature

As early as the eighteenth century African-American writers have held, and continue to hold, disparate and often contradictory attitudes towards their relationship to Africa and its peoples. Marion Berghan explains in her book, *Images of Africa in Black American Literature* (1977), that the variant attitudes African-American writers have towards Africa cannot be traced from one historical period to another or from writer to writer, but instead seem to depend on historical circumstance and individual experience of each writer. Thus, for instance, the poet Phillis Wheatley can claim Africa as her "native shore" and reject it as "a dark abode" in the same stanza, as the following lines from her poem "To the University of Cambridge" show;

'T was not long since I left my native shore,
The land of errors and Egyptian gloom:
Father of mercy! 't was thy gracious hand
Brought me in safety from those dark abodes

Wheatley appreciated her conversion to Christianity in the New World and felt that she had been saved from ignorance and paganism; however she still had good memories of Africa as her homeland. Her contemporary, Jupiter Hammon on the other hand, saw Africa as a land of barbarism and savagery from which slavery saved him. To George Moses Horton, Africa idealised as heaven, a Garden of Eden, represented freedom from slavery. In each of these cases the role played by the poets' personal circumstances is

apparent; for Wheatley, the influence lay with the religious Boston family that bought her on a slave auction, who instilled in her Christian values and encouraged her in her poetic endeavours. However, the fact that she left Africa at the age of six gave her memories of her homeland. Born in slavery, Hammon, on the other hand, had no concrete knowledge of Africa, and his poetry writing depended on the munificence of his slave master, whose Christian values he shared.

Most importantly, for African-American writers, their knowledge and attitudes about Africa are informed by the images of Africa circulated by the white dominant culture. Throughout various periods of development in Western discourse, Africa has always been portrayed as both exotic and primitive, both evil and innocent. Thus for George Moses Horton, Africa is idealised; for him the “grief and anguish” of the slave can only be soothed by the image of heaven that Africa poses, as the following lines from his poem proclaim;

Soar on the pinion of that dove
Which long has cooed for thee,
And breathed her notes from Afric's grove,
The sound of liberty.

This disparity of attitudes continues, as a century later Frederick Douglass was to discourage slaves from looking to Africa for their freedom because in his opinion it was Africans themselves who sold their kin to slavery. He exhorted his enslaved brethren to look for freedom in America instead. Reading Douglass's pronouncements on Africa and Africans in their context, that of nineteenth century abolitionist discourse, it is apparent that although they are about Africa, such statements have very little to do with Africa; instead they speak to American politics.

As Marion Berghan explains, when Douglass was warning slaves against looking to Africa for freedom he was speaking against those who sought to repatriate many African-Americans to Africa as a way of getting rid of undesirables, because they thought that they had nothing to contribute to American society. Douglass's images of Africans in his statements do not address an African audience, but are strictly for African-Americans who hold an idealised image of Africa. As already mentioned, this image of Africa, and most of the opinions about the continent in African-American literary imagination can always be traced to the image of Africa in white culture. African-Americans, Berghan explains, rarely experienced Africa directly, instead their knowledge "was transmitted via the dominant white culture" (1977: 19).

Berghan goes on to argue that even the Harlem Renaissance artists – whose cultural and political ideal was to rehabilitate the image of the black people everywhere – were torn between idealised and exotic images of Africa. Countee Cullen's famous poem "Heritage" epitomises the inherent ambivalence African-Americans feel about Africa.

First of all Africa is too distant to know intimately, as the speaker asks in the first stanza:

*One three centuries removed
From the scene his fathers loved
Spicy grove and banyan tree,
What is Africa to me?*

Africa and America are the two points between which the Negro has to negotiate his cultural identity as an African and American. Africa, primitive, instinctual, is the heart while America stands for civilisation, and therefore the mind; however the speaker feels alienated from both. The two are irreconcilable, the Negro has to ignore the call of the wild in order to make his way in the new world:

So I lie, who never quite
Safely sleep from rain at night
While its painful measures drip
Through my body crying, "Strip!
Doff this new exuberance,
Come and dance the Lover's Dance."

Civilisation, represented by Christianity, represses the primitive, and therefore "natural" drives that the speaker associates with Africa. The speaker's attempt to negotiate his identity by turning his back on Africa is shown to come at a high price, as Berghan explains: "For [Cullen] Africa represents all that his education forces him to suppress, which is giving free expression to his sexuality and to his *élan vital* in general" (1977: 132). Simply choosing one self over the other cannot solve this dilemma; instead, as W. E. B. DuBois suggests in *The Souls of Black Folk*, the Negro's wish is to "merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of his older selves to be lost" (1969: 5).

DuBois was in fact among the first to make use of African ancestry to create an ethnic, rather than racial connection between African-Americans and black people in Africa and the diaspora. According DuBois, black people are bound together not just by skin colour but also by culture. He suggests that black people occupy the geographical space of America while at the same time forming part of a larger culture of black people everywhere. In "The Conservation of the Races" he speaks of race as a "vast family of human beings" connected not just by "physical characteristics" but by a culture that is encoded in their "literature and art" (1971: 20 –24). Africa in these representations is crucial to defining black American culture in that it is a space that defines blackness as more than a race, but as ethnicity.

Perhaps the best way to understand how blackness functions in most texts by African-Americans, particularly Walker's novel *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, is to read "Africa," in the term "African-American," as a marker of ethnicity, or as a cultural symbol for African-Americans, in the sense that Anthony P. Cohen defines these terms in "Culture as Identity: An Anthropologist's View" (1993). According to Cohen, ethnicity is a fluid term that changes with almost each application, always depending on the context. He explains, "Ethnicity has become a mode of action: it refers to a decision people make to depict themselves or others symbolically as the bearers of a certain cultural identity" (1993: 197). Cohen points out that the culture does not define a person but a person defines the culture. And ethnicity is the process by which people actively create their culture or make cultural meaning out of symbols. A symbol on the other hand can be anything that people use to create cultural identity, and these, according to Cohen are malleable and often meaningless by themselves. He explains:

Symbols are quite simply carriers of meaning. To be effective, therefore, they should be imprecise, in order that the largest possible number of people can modulate a shared symbol to their own wills, to their own interpretive requirements: a tightly defined symbol is pretty useless as anything other than a purely formal sign... [S]ymbols are inherently meaningless, they are not lexical; they do not have a truth value. They are pragmatic devices which are invested with meaning through social process of one kind or another. They are potent resources in the arenas of politics and identity. (1993: 196)

"Africa" in African-American literature has long been made to function in this manner; it has been used in numerous ways to shape an African-American identity.

Manning Marable also makes a useful distinction between race and Blackness or African-American identity in "Race, Identity and Political Culture" (1992), when he suggests that race is something imposed from without while Blackness is ethnicity in Cohen's sense of the term. He describes Blackness or African-American identity thus:

Blackness, or African-American identity, is much more than race. It is also traditions, rituals, values, and belief systems of African-American people. (1992: 295)

Ethnicity as something that is created by a group of people is thus more powerful and flexible than race, particularly because people do not only choose how to depict themselves, but what symbols to use. African-American cultural identity then, is a sum total of these beliefs, rituals, values and traditions, and Africa, in such creations of identity, is most often the symbol used to aggregate people who share these beliefs, rather than integrate them, as Cohen would put it. As such those people can differ, and so impact their ambivalence about the continent. To put it another way, even if all African-American people claim a connection to Africa, how they define that connection, or how strongly they feel that connection to be, can differ from individual to individual. In such a case, culture as an aggregation of beliefs and values, is implicitly individualistic.

If culture is understood in this way, then Walker can, in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, claim Africa through the history of slavery, but the Africa she claims is a symbol that she modulates to her own will, for her own political ends. She is perhaps justified in creating Africa in her text, if we read Africa in her text as cultural symbol that she taps into in the process of creating her ethnicity in her cultural milieu. It is understandable that she feels that her fate and Tashi's, are linked because of slavery, and hence in speaking for Tashi, she is speaking for her slave foremothers who probably came to America "genitally mutilated." As she explains in her epistle to the reader:

I do not know from what part of Africa my African ancestors came, and so I *claim* the continent. I suppose I have *created* Olinka as my village and the Olinkans as one of my ancient, ancestral tribal peoples. (268, emphasis mine)

That being the case, Africa as Walker's fictional creation does not have to bear resemblance to any 'real' Africa, but is crucial in defining its author's cultural identity.

Walker's Africa, like Molefi Kete Asante's nationalist project, which he terms Afrocentricity, is more about defining the African-American's identity in the changing American society than about contemporary Africa. Asante's Afrocentricity focuses on certain aspects of Africa to create an African-American history and culture. In Asante's view, African-Americans have a rich history of civilisation to draw from, particularly from Egypt. In "Putting Africa at the Centre," he explains that the theoretical aspects of Afrocentricity "consist of interpretation and analysis from the perspective of African people as subjects rather than as objects on the fringes of European experience" (1991: 46). As authors of their own destiny, then, the people of African descent can rewrite the whole history of civilisation and place Africa at the point of origin, not only of Western civilisation but of world civilisation. Asante, however, ignores the histories of Southern and Western Africa, in fact sacrifices many parts of Africa in order to valorise the history of Egypt as the origin of all civilisation, to which all Africans can lay claim. If anything, in his articulation of African-American identity he relegates Africa to the fringes of African-American experience as his Afrocentricity has little relevance to the experiences of most Africans. Paul Gilroy rightly redefines Asante's project as Americocentricity rather than Afrocentricity, because, as he explains, movements such as Molefe Asante's Afrocentricity have more to do with American identity than with contemporary Africa. They are more about putting African-American identity at the centre. As Gilroy points out, Asante's project is not about creating a new historical perspective for Africans and people of African origin in the diaspora, instead it is "stubbornly focused around the

reconstitution of individual consciousness rather than around the reconstruction of the black nation in exile or elsewhere” (1993: 305).

The same can be said of Walker’s project because even if she is not as interested as Asante in creating systematic nationalism for African-Americans, she is trying to create some kind of global identity for women, particularly black women, into which African women need to be incorporated. Her view of Africa is just as limited and myopic in that, like Asante, she does not seem to comprehend the vastness of the continent, and depicts it instead as a homogeneous cultural space. However, as already mentioned, if we read Walker’s *Possessing* as the author’s quest for her identity, her location in mainstream American culture, then it becomes easier to understand her representation.

Ethnicity is something that both the author and the protagonist of *Possessing* are trying to define, in that both are trying to depict themselves in a certain way. For the author, the decision to turn to the subject of female circumcision is about ethnicity, it is about finding new ways of thinking about African-American identity. As such, reading Walker’s text outside the context of other African-American writings on Africa would constitute a misreading. One cannot understand the way ethnicity functions for the novel’s protagonist independently of her author’s motives. That is, Walker misrepresents her protagonist’s ethnicity in order to inscribe her own. Tashi decides to be circumcised even though she is well past the age when female circumcision should have been performed according to Olinka custom. The Olinka, the novel’s fictional tribe, are facing decimation from colonialists, and Tashi decides to join the rebel forces, called the Mbeles, to fight the colonials. As part of the struggle against colonial powers, she decides to be circumcised, to join other women in defying authorities by returning to practices

that have been banned. By deciding to be circumcised Tashi is politicising her culture, and circumcision functions as a symbol of that politicised culture. Tashi explains her decision to be circumcised thus: “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” (31). In this instance Tashi engages in what Cohen would call “pragmatic politics” where “a version of culture is employed *tactically* in a political encounter” (1993: 202 original emphasis).

Seeing Tashi’s decision in this way means that circumcision is not a static, fixed “tradition” that stays the same throughout the ages, but something that is manipulated by those who participate in it. In the Olinka case the chiefs, the colonisers, the missionaries and the Olinkans manipulate female circumcision to suit their own ends – whether political or mercenary. The imprisoned Olinkan political leader, known in the novel simply as “Our Leader,” and described as similar to Mandela and Kenyatta, insists on female circumcision as a kind of sexual and cultural authenticity. And the Olinka chief uses the rite for his own political ends as M’lissa, the circumciser, or the *tsunga*, to use the novel’s term, tells Tashi:

It was not absolutely sure that the chief would make us return to circumcision. After all, he was always grinning into the faces of the white missionaries and telling them he was a modern man. Not a barbarian, which he could have been, for they called the ‘bath’ barbaric. He was a chief, they said, he could stop it.
(240)

M’lissa herself derives power from her role as a circumciser; she is eventually declared a cultural monument for upholding her people’s traditions. For all these people – the political leader who uses female circumcision as a form of cultural resistance, the colonisers who hold up female circumcision as a sign of barbarity, M’lissa and the chief

who use the practise for social and political power – female circumcision is a means to an end. But the text resists such a reading, opting instead to concretise the practice into a culture that defines the people who practise it. The text insists that Tashi is a victim of that culture and undermines her decision to undergo the practice as misguided and accidental. Tashi's therapist informs her, "yours is the pain of the careless carpenter who, with his hammer, bashes his own thumb" (47).

Portraying Tashi's decision as an accidental mistake conforms to Cohen's suggestion that "with ignorance of a culture goes the denial of its integrity" (1993: 199). Without investigating the motives and the circumstances – both social and historical – that may drive people to portray themselves in particular ways, Tashi's decision will be read as false consciousness. The text presents Tashi's decision to be circumcised as fatally misguided because it imbues Tashi's culture with definite substance. Female circumcision is represented as a fixed tangible symbol that represents the culture of Olinkan people. Again Cohen makes a useful suggestion that "because culture is expressed symbolically, and thus has no fixed meanings, it *is* often invisible to others, especially powerful others" (original emphasis, 199). Thus Walker misreads Tashi's culture because it is invisible to her, she sees it through her own. However, such a misreading of culture and politics in African contexts is so commonplace in African-American literature, in fact in Western discourse, as to have become almost conventional. This point will be discussed in greater detail later. For now, the representation of Tashi's decision to be circumcised as a cultural blunder, speaks to the way Walker uses Tashi's ethnicity to validate her own. She needs to concretise Tashi's culture only to dismantle it,

thus elevating her own culture above that of Tashi and people like her. In order to rescue Tashi, she has to show her as in need of rescue. As Trinh T. Minh-ha (1989) explains:

The invention of needs always goes hand in hand with the compulsion to help the needy, a noble self-gratifying task that also renders the helper's service indispensable. The part of the savior has to be filled as long as the problem of the endangered species lasts (1989: 89).

Thus Walker exclusively focuses on the backwash of female circumcision in order to justify her intervention. But if we look at culture as loose, pliable and transmutable and female circumcision as one of the things people use in various ways to depict themselves in certain ways then perhaps we can understand the contexts – historical, social and national – that produce these practices.

Like Molefi Kete Asante's Afrocentric project, Walker's text, which aspires to the status of a political novel, cannot transcend the conditions that produce it. Hence the Africa that is depicted in her text has very little to do with African nation states and African cultures. Walker relies on the images of Africa that have been the staple diet of colonialist writers, Western anthropologists and others for centuries. It is through this reliance that she participates in what Christopher Miller terms the Africanist discourse. According to Miller, Africanist discourse is not based on empirical or verifiable knowledge about the continent; if anything it thrives on mystification and myth-making. He points out that since its advent, which he posits might even predate antiquity, Africanist discourse has always been riddled with distortions, which in fact were often avoidable, but inevitable when one considers that Africa was always depicted not only as unknown but unknowable. Miller explains,

Knowledge about Africa, as opposed to the "Orient," has tended to be proffered with caveats; Africanist authors frequently call their own authority and mastery of

the subject into question. . . . That screen, reducing European knowledge to “a matter of guess-work,” does not represent a renunciation of the desire to know, but it throws doubt on the capacity of the discourse to create an object that will strictly obey the rules of knowledge: to have an identity of its own, or to so appear. (1985: 21)

Further, Miller adds, Africanist discourse is comparable though different to Edward Said’s orientalism; it shares the same motives as Said’s Orientalism in that it seeks to produce knowledge about the Other for Western consumption. In *Orientalism* (1978), Said defines Orientalism as a discourse that seeks to “come to terms with the orient [that is] based on the Orient’s special place in European Western experience” (1978: 1). The same can be said of Africanist discourse; that is, one cannot understand Africanist discourse without understanding the place that Africa occupies – has always occupied in Western imagination. Even the name ‘Africa’ itself, Christopher Miller explains in his book *Blank Darkness*, is a European invention. The territory now called Africa has changed over the centuries depending on European knowledge. Most texts on female circumcision seem to replicate this discourse, in that despite their varying points of view, they reproduce similarly imperialistic images of Africa and Africans.

A manner of speaking about Africa: Africanist discourse and the problem of audience

In their book, *The Myth of Africa* (1977), Dorothy Hammond and Ata Jablow give a detailed account of the prevalent images associated with Africa that have over centuries become “a manner of speaking” about the continent. In this book the authors identify some persistent images of Africa in Western anthropology and colonial texts that when read together, form a literary tradition. They argue that this tradition became an appropriate way of writing about Africa mainly because “authenticity seems assured

when a writer gives his narrative “verisimilitude” by using the expected conventional images”(1977: 17). In this literary tradition, Africa always figures as the antithesis of Europe. One hardly learns about what Africa is, but about what it is not, mainly because the writers perceive the continent from their own cultural contexts: “all perception is made through the lenses of one’s own system of values and beliefs” (17). Despite the literary conformity however, there remains a continuing need to discover Africa and to portray it as uncharted or virgin territory, not only untouched by civilisation but waiting to be discovered, therefore evincing the author's sense of adventure and courage. Thus despite the many explorations, writings and stereotypes, Africa continues to be "each man's unexplored continent, which he alone must discover" (17). This is not necessarily a contradiction but is rather inevitable when one considers that discourse on Africa started with fantastic tales of men with tails (Miller, 1985: 3) and demanded “always something new” (4). This means that the narratives may not differ in their objectives and may even employ the same images, with a new difference/deviance found by each writer. However, that difference is still narrated in the same language and the same terms of reference are used in trying to understand it. Or a new part of Africa is discovered to which the same discourse can be extended.

Hammond and Jablow identify numerous rhetorical devices that have become “a manner of speaking” about Africa, and point out that “by persistent reiteration a manner of speaking can become the substance of what is said” (14). Female circumcision in Africa seems to have revived these rhetorical devices. Walker and many other Western feminists seem to draw on each other, in what Christopher Miller would call a “cannibalistic, plagiarizing intertextuality” (6) to produce some kind of generic African

woman. In fact most writings on female circumcision by Western feminists seem to be forming a literary tradition that is as unabashedly imperialistic and ethnocentric as early nineteenth-century writings on Africa were. One of the enduring features of this emerging literary tradition is the map of Africa, which like the maps of Africa produced since antiquity, seems to be a subjective depiction.

The constant reproduction of the map of Africa in most texts on female circumcision is not coincidental; it is a rhetorical device that attempts not only to fix the practice in specific areas or to produce concrete evidence of its prevalence in the mapped areas, but most often the map serves as a substitute for such knowledge. The map is often used as a way of elevating anecdotal evidence to “scientific knowledge.” Fran P. Hosken, perhaps the first Western feminist to produce a map of African areas that practice female circumcision, and certainly the first Western feminist to sensationalise female circumcision, in the famous series *The Hoskens Report*, claimed that the map she produced was based on extensive research in Africa. Though her research findings proved difficult for other researchers to replicate, her estimates have most often provided a prototype for other researchers, and “have motivated systematic data collection in several nations” (Shell-Duncan and Hernlund 2000: 7). Thus, even though her findings have since become suspect, this did not deter later feminists and anthropologists from drawing on her findings.

As a substitute for statistical evidence or any kind of knowledge about the practice, the map is hardly informative. For instance in her book, *Prisoners of Ritual: An Odyssey into Female Genital Circumcision in Africa*, Hanny Lightfoot-Klein (1989) points out time and again the lack of official statistics on the prevalence of the practice in

certain parts of Africa, and yet produces a map that attempts to fix the areas where this practice is prevalent (Fig 1). Though Ellen Gruenbaum is eager in her book, *The Female Circumcision Controversy* (2001), to dispute many of Lightfoot-Klein's claims she produces a map that is not very different from Lightfoot-Klein's (fig. 2). Gruenbaum's research is conducted more or less in the same areas as Lightfoot-Klein's, yet her map on the left is different, and at the same time not that different from Lightfoot-Klein's.

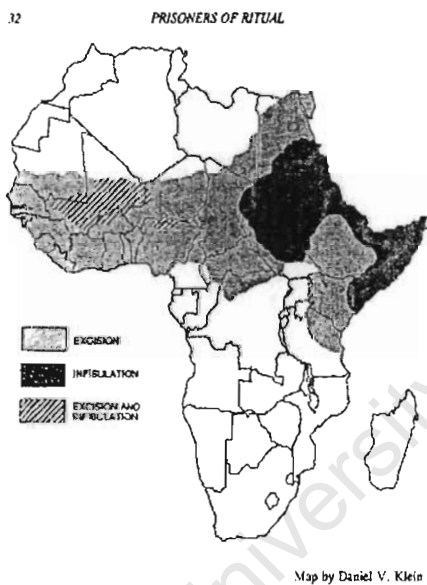


Fig. 1

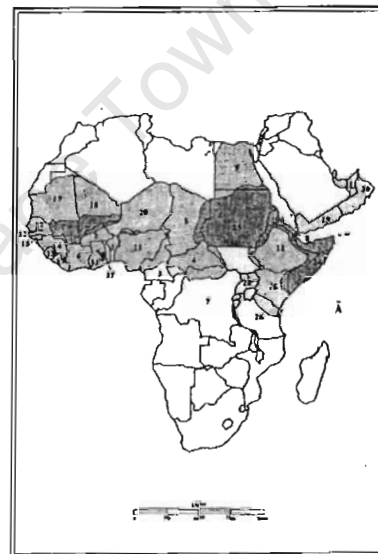


fig. 2

In both maps, the areas where female circumcision is "said" to be practised are, curiously enough, shaded. This shading recalls Marlow's statement, in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, that just as Europeans shed light on Africa the continent becomes darker (Brantlinger, 1986: 185). Marlow tells his audience:

Now when I was a little chap I had a passion for maps. I would look for hours at South America, or Africa, or Australia, and lose myself in the glories of exploration. At that time there were many blank spaces on earth... But there was one yet – the biggest, the most blank, so to speak – that I had a hankering after.

True, by this time it was not a blank space anymore. It had got filled since my boyhood with rivers and lakes and males. It had ceased to be a blank space of delightful mystery – a white patch for a boy to dream over. It had become a place of darkness (1971: 70 –71).

According to Marlow, what at first seems to be enlightening proves more mystifying; “shedding light” on Africa, knowledge about place names and rivers, shrouds the continent in mystery and darkness. The shading of these areas has the same effect, only with more sinister implications because, as Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan argue, in this mapping “some regions remain ‘dark,’ unenlightened, and thus more dangerous for women than others” (1996: 17).

Secondly, looking at the two maps together, it is unclear where the space designated Africa really begins and ends. It would seem that to this day Africa remains uncircumscribed, its perimeters still “a matter of guesswork.” Gruenbaum’s map includes The Middle East, while Lightfoot-Klein’s does not. Without the texts that label these maps, Africa as a place is both unknown and known. Again Miller is useful in explaining that “a map is all that is needed to define a place name.... Names such as Ethiopia and Sudan are evidently the inventions of outsiders, of lighter complexion, who named the place in relation to themselves. By doing so, they attached a kind of significance to that which would have normally had none” (1985: 8 –9). Not surprisingly, there is no agreement on the areas that practice female circumcision, and therefore no consistency in shading – there are still many blank spaces for a “boy to dream over.”

The editors of a collection of essays on female circumcision, *Female “Circumcision” in Africa: Culture, Controversy and Change*, also feel compelled to produce a map that is just as inconsequential in that it provides no information on the

prevalence of the practice in Africa or anywhere else for that matter. Instead the editors offer the usual caveats:

We wish to caution interpretation of this map by noting two points: first, the prevalence of female “circumcision” in countries where *some form* of the practice is *reportedly found* varies widely from one ethnic group to another, second, for some countries *reliable* figures on the prevalence are not available, and reports of the existence of the practice *are based on anecdotal information*. (2000: 9, emphasis added)

There is enough here to preclude the provision of something as substantial as a map, yet they do produce one. The only thing that can be said of their map is that it is the areas that *do not* practice female circumcision that are shaded (fig.3).



Map 1.1 African countries in which female genital cutting has been reported since 1979

Fig. 3

The maps are a clear indication that the target audience for these representations is Western, and not those they are about; they imagine someone unfamiliar with Africa.

And they are perhaps the strongest link between this emerging female circumcision literary genre and its precursor, imperialist discourse. As Grewal and Kaplan point out, colonial discourse seeks to “naturalise the social world through representation.” (1996: 16) and maps are a big part of that representation.

Though Walker does not produce a map for her novel, her representation addresses itself to that same audience. For instance Gina Dent writes:

We do not, for example, necessarily recognize, until Walker makes it clear in her closing address to the reader, that Tashi is one of many invented “African” names, that the Olinkans are not an existing African tribe, that the village and the nation in which this story takes place are the products of Walker’s imagination. (1993: 7)

It is such ignorance that the mapping of Africa anticipates. No one familiar with Africa could make such claims.

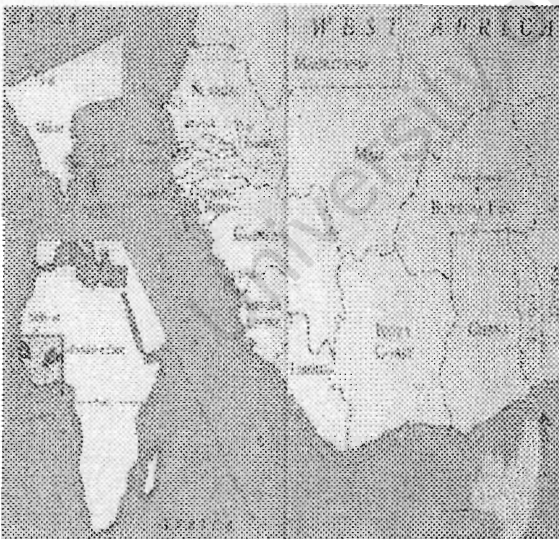


Fig. 4

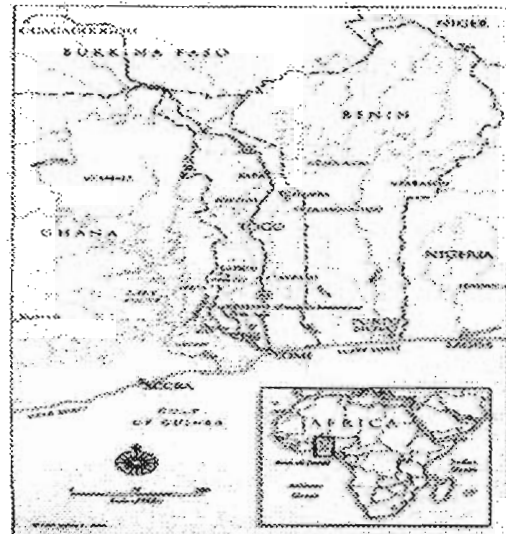


Fig.5.

In her follow-up text *Warrior Marks: Female Genital Mutilation and the Sexual Blinding of Women*, a book that attempts to document the practise of female circumcision in some African countries, and also accompanies a film documentary that Walker

collaborated on with Pratibha Parmar, Walker and Parmar do produce a map of Africa (Fig. 4). It is unclear, however, whether the map charts the areas that practise “female genital mutilation” or some form of “female genital mutilation” or areas that Parmar and Walker visited during the making of their documentary. The map is there because it is a manner of speaking about Africa, and now female circumcision. This fits in with Miller’s suggestion that Africa fills in a pre-existing blank space in Western narratives so much so that “if Africanist discourse had not existed prior to the advent of the modern novel, one would have to invent it” (1985: 169). Africa continues to be a presence and an absence, non-existent outside discourse.

The map on the right (fig. 5) is taken from Fauziya Kassindja’s biography *Do They Hear You When You Cry*, written by Leila Bahir. The book tells the story of a young Togolese woman who goes to America to escape female circumcision in her country. While Kassindja’s book is only tangentially about female circumcision, focusing more on the treatment of immigrants and asylum seekers and refugees, it continues this Africanist literary tradition by producing a map of Africa, simply because it refers to Africa and female circumcision. Fauziya Kassindja’s map is as obfuscating as Walker’s and Parmar’s in that its sole purpose is to point out Togo, the area where the protagonist comes from, and tells one nothing about female circumcision and its prevalence in the mapped areas. Kassindja’s map of Africa, one might argue, is there simply because she remembers seeing it in other texts on female circumcision. Judging by the controversy and sensationalism that greeted Walker’s *Possessing the Secret of Joy* and *Warrior Marks*, it is hardly coincidental that the two maps are so similar.

Like their anthropological antecedents, texts on female circumcision are formulaic and constantly draw on each other to substantiate what is really no more than gossip, as most areas are “said” or “reported” to be practising “some form” of female circumcision (or, to use the most preferred term, female genital mutilation). Rarely does one encounter statistics, or any knowledge about the cultures that are “said” to practise the procedure.

This confirms Trinh T. Minh-ha’s suggestion that in anthropology

Scientific gossip takes place under relatively intimate conditions and mostly without witnesses; hence the gossipers’ need to act in solidarity, leaning on and referring to each other for more credibility. (1989: 68)

Texts on female circumcision rely on each other in a series of references; Gruenbaum refers to Lightfoot-Klein, who refers to Hosken and so on. The map has become a convention, and citing each other a ritual. Again Minh-ha elaborates:

The confidence they (re)gain through the ritual of citing all their fellows’ (dead or living) names has allowed them to speak with the apathetic tone of the voice of knowledge. ... Gossip’s pretensions to truth remain however very peculiar. The kind of truth it claims to disclose is a confidential truth that requires commitment from both the speaker and the listener. He who lends an ear to gossip already accepts either sympathizing or being an accomplice of the gossiper. Scientific gossip, therefore, often unveils itself as none other than a form of institutionalized Indiscretion. (68)

Though clearly an appropriation of the other’s voice, Fauziya Kassindja’s biography is also proof that the other is not always excluded from this institutionalised indiscretion; she can be invited to participate, but in the terms set by powerful others. For instance, some of the contributors in Shell-Duncan and Hernlund’s volume are African women who bring interesting views to the debate. But their voices are already framed by the discourse I have been describing. It is also noteworthy that Kassindja’s biography is penned by an American lawyer Leila Bahir, who has a stake in the representation; for

instance, she never misses an opportunity to advance her other work on migration issues, her religion and the status of women in general.

Another contentious issue in the debates on female circumcision is terminology; one is always required to explain one's preferred term for the practice. Walker, Daly, Hosken and others insist on the term female genital mutilation, because they view any "irreversible removal of a healthy organ or tissue [as] inherently mutilative" (L. A Obiora, 1997: 289). However this term has been severally rejected as value-laden and insensitive to the women who undergo the practice. For instance L. Amede Obiora (1997) points out in her paper, "Rethinking Female Circumcision," that the term female genital mutilation, as "a catch-all phrase" is a misnomer because "not all forms of genital surgeries are impairing" (1997: 290). She goes on to use the term "female circumcision," which she prefers because it is a term most used by indigenous African coalitions (290). Some prefer the term genital surgeries (Gunning, 1992) or genital cutting (Shell-Duncan and Hernlund, 2000). These authors prefer terms like genital surgeries or cutting because they want to be neutral and they also feel that the procedure is more severe than the removal of male foreskin, and therefore the word circumcision creates a false equation between the two. However, the yearly reports of deaths and penile mutilations resulting from male circumcision in South Africa cast doubt on the mildness of male circumcision (Meintjes, 1998: 67 - 9). In fact, the refusal to investigate male circumcision – for instance Lightfoot-Klein cursorily looks at male circumcision in her book and Walker insists that male circumcision is merely a removal of a bit of skin (*Possessing*: v) – has to do with the desire to see female circumcision as an antiquated, deeply rooted tradition that has remained unchanged for generations. When separated from male circumcision,

which is also widely practiced in the West, female circumcision becomes something uniquely African and therefore backward and barbaric. While Walker points out that female circumcision is a worldwide practice, she fails to address other regions that might perform the procedure. The single case of a white middle-class American woman, Amy Maxwell in *Possessing*, who undergoes clitoridectomy is an isolated incident, an aberrant choice by her parents. And in *Possessing* even this incident originates in Africa:

Many African women have come here, said Amy. Enslaved women. Many of them sold into bondage because they refused to be circumcised, but many of them sold into bondage circumcised and infibulated. It was these sewed up women who fascinated the American doctors who flocked to the slave auctions to examine them. ... They learned to do the 'procedure' on other enslaved women....They found use for it on white women. (178)

Walker's Africa is the source of pain and evil. Raye, Tashi's African American psychiatrist, has to turn to her dentist to inflict on herself the pain that even remotely simulates the pain that African women continuously inflict on each other. She tells Tashi that in America, this kind of pain is "the best that [she] can do" (125). Such pronouncements are also common in texts on female circumcision. Graphic depictions of bodily mutilation and physical pain are used as spectres of African barbarity. Even physical pain takes different meaning and form for different bodies. In her book, Lightfoot-Klein goes so far as to claim that childbirth is not painful for Western women because they are not "mutilated." Describing a conversation she had with a Sudanese woman she reports: "When I told her that some normal women experience little pain in giving birth, she experienced total disbelief" (1989: 10). Walker substantiates this claim in her text when she describes Lisette, Adam's French mistress's child labour as orgasmic.

Postcolonial history versus postmodernist “truth”

It is not surprising that Walker’s Africanist stance has caused problems for many critics, particularly African critics. Many critics have denounced her conflation of the subject/other position in her writings on female circumcision as imperialistic and culturally chauvinistic. In her essay, “Alice in Motherland: Reading Alice Walker on Africa and Screening the Color ‘Black,’” Oyeronke Oyewumi (2003) locates Walker’s work on female circumcision in an imperialistic discourse that, she argues, always focuses on the African woman’s sexuality as an anomaly. She argues that Walker’s work makes sense only within what she terms the “somatocentric” Western culture that privileges the body above all else. Micere Githae Mugo (1997) also takes issue with Walker in “Elitist Anti-Circumcision Discourse as Mutilating and Anti-feminist,” and suggests that Walker participates in a discourse that undermines the agency of its subjects. According to Mugo, Walker does not engage the practitioners of female circumcision in a dialogue that would facilitate better understanding of this practice, but colludes in objectifying and stereotyping African women. This is because, as she puts it, Walker’s “philosophical outlook is informed by colonial and missionary conceptions of Africa, while her analysis draws from anthropologists of the same tradition” (1997: 463). Both authors decry Walker’s messianic stance as self-serving and misleading; they point out her failure to acknowledge the work of many African writers on the subject of female circumcision.

As the arguments above show, I agree with these authors, but I also read Walker’s *Possessing the Secret of Joy* as a postmodernist text that seeks to displace entrenched ideas of realism, history and truth. I argue that even as Walker succumbs to certain

conventions of writing about this practice, in postmodernist fashion, she is doing so in order to re-motivate the past and re-examine it in the light of the present. As Linda Hutcheon explains in *The Politics of Postmodernism*, postmodernism “reveals the desire to understand the present culture as the product of previous representations” (1989: 58). Walker’s text is furthermore both political and postmodern even though this might seem like a contradiction, for postmodernism and politics are often understood as mutually exclusive. Hutcheon defends postmodernism against charges of being apolitical and gratuitous, only “offering questions, never final answers” (1988: 42). For Hutcheon the appeal of postmodernism is precisely its rejection of monolithic historiography and final truth. She writes:

The postmodern is in no way absolutist; it does not say that “it is both impossible and useless to try and establish hierarchical order, some system of priorities in life” (Fokkema 1986b, 82). What it does say is that there are all kinds of orders and systems in our world – and we create them all. That is their justification and their limitation. They do not exist “out there”, fixed, given, universal; they are human constructs in history. This does not make them any less necessary or desirable. It does however, as we have seen, condition their truth value. (42)

So characterised then, postmodernism provides the perfect tool for exploring counter-narratives. It does not criticise and continuously question merely for the sake of criticising and questioning, but does both to create new situations.

This is what Walker tries to do in her work; her corpus draws on the past of black women as a way of understanding the future. She consistently draws from the work of other black women, her predecessors, to chart the progress of black women in America. As Athena Vrettos suggests, Walker reclaims the history of black women in an attempt “to forge spiritual bonds with the past” (1989: 455 – 73). Walker’s work has always evinced her awareness that this past cannot be simply recovered and reproduced but

needs rethinking in the light of the current situation. Many of her fictions are ways of rereading her literary foremothers, rewriting their works and bringing them to the present. However, postmodernism does not only rewrite or rethink the past but the past and the present co-exist in self-reflexive intertextuality. It is in this sense that Walker's *Possessing the Secret of Joy* is a postmodernist text: the presence of other texts, like Mirella Ricciardi's memoir, *The African Saga* (1981), her previous novel, *The Color Purple* and many others, create a plurality of voices that disrupts the linearity of the narrative. The co-existence of the so-called low and high art forms, past and present are some of the text's postmodernist features.

Tashi's story is preceded by epigraphs from different texts: there's an excerpt from Walker's earlier novel, *The Color Purple*, a paraphrasing of Ricciardi's now famous assertion that "black people are natural, they possess the secret of joy" from which the novel takes its title, and a message from a bumper sticker. Ricciardi's text is autobiographical, unflinchingly racist and paternalistic towards its African subjects. Lacking irony and self-reflexivity, Ricciardi's text has never been considered a great work of literature; its mass appeal made sure that it was categorised as a low art form. The same can be said of the bumper sticker because bumper stickers are usually anonymous, witty aphorisms aimed at expressing zeitgeist; their mass appeal makes them easily accessible and popular. The co-existence of these epigrams with what Walker would like to be considered as serious art (her earlier novel *The Color Purple*) complicates the easy categorisation of high and low art forms. In fact, it is through postmodernism that labels such as "high" and "low" art forms become obsolete. As Hutcheon points out, "postmodernism is both academic and popular, elitist and

accessible” and thus closes “the gap ... between high and low art forms” (1989: 44).

Walker draws on everything from film and texts as diverse as those of Marcel Griaule and Carl Jung for her representation, and it is this curious mixture of fictions that signals the author’s postmodernist intentions.

Where her postmodernist strategy fails her however, is when she subjugates some voices to others, as well as her uncritical use of colonial, anthropological texts like Marcel Griaule’s. Like most postmodernist fictions, *Possessing* exists somewhere between trivial and serious art, or “high” and “low” art, and also problematises easy differentiation between reality and fiction. The novel’s opening seems to insist on its fictitiousness, especially when Tashi’s story is framed by a fable of the panthers. And yet the novel’s ending insists that Tashi’s story is based on reality. Tashi’s story will resemble that of the ill-fated panther, in that she will endure suffering and only be liberated by self-love; but it is also real in that in the end, in the author’s epistle to The Reader, she will appear “in flesh” embodied by the woman who plays her in the film *The Color Purple* (267). As Walker explains in her epistle to the reader:

The young woman who played Tashi, who has barely a moment on the screen, was an African from Kenya: very beautiful, graceful and poised. Seeing her brought the Tashi of my book vividly to mind, as I was reminded that in Kenya, even as this young woman was being flown to Los Angeles to act in the film, little girls were being forced under the shards of unwashed glass, tin-can tops, rusty razors and dull knives of traditional circumcisers, whom I’ve named *tsungas*.
(267)

It is only through these multiple fictions that Tashi’s story can be understood. According to Hutcheon, since there is no longer anything new or novel in the world today the past discourses that “contextualise and precede everything we say and do” (1988: 39) cannot be ignored. They therefore appear in a critical co-existence with the present. With her

assortment of epigraphs Walker is not only making clear her awareness of the parasitism of her narrative, but wants to make the reader aware of other possible texts from which she derives Tashi's story. She is real at the moment when she cannot be; the woman who embodies Tashi "in flesh," only "plays" Tashi in the film. She flits across the screen for a moment and yet warrants a "book of her own." She is constructed through an association of fictions and her story literally exists between fiction, myth, dreams and reality, between the epigraphs and the epistle to the reader. Apart from the fact that the woman who plays Tashi in the film is from Kenya, where female circumcision is "said to be practised," there does not seem to be any justification for her to embody the fictional Tashi.

Tashi's dream identifies her with the mythical queen of termites; she is meant to stand for all women who undergo female circumcision. As Pierre, her husband's son with his lover Lisette, explains to Tashi:

You are the queen who loses her wings. It is you lying in the dark with millions of worker termites – who are busy, by the way, maintaining mushroom farms from which they feed you – buzzing about. You who are fat, greasy, the color of tobacco spit, inert; only a tube through which generations of visionless offspring pass, their blindness perhaps made up for by their incessant mindless activity, which never stops, day or night. You who endure all this, only at the end to die, and be devoured by those to whom you've given birth. (217)

Thus Tashi's dream is interpreted with the use of Marcel Griaule's disquisition on the Dogon people of Mali. Her story is not just intertextual but multi-textual and multi-contextual; she inhabits many spaces and genres and is both anthropological and fictional. Again Hutcheon is helpful in explaining that in postmodernism

Fiction does not mirror reality; nor does it reproduce it. It cannot. ... Instead, fiction is offered as another of the discourses by which we construct our versions of reality, and both the construction and the need for it are what are foregrounded in the postmodernist novel. (1988: 40)

Tashi also partakes in this creation of multiple fictions, and often distorts reality or blurs the line between fiction and reality. Her liberation comes from not only identifying what has been done to her as a pervasive subjugation of women by patriarchal culture that sanctions mutilation of women, but by striking back at that culture by killing its “monument”, M’lissa the circumciser. But Tashi’s pivotal act of resistance, murdering the *tsunga*, is obscured and distorted because she tells Olivia:

You are right Olivia, that I did not kill M’Lissa. I am grateful, I say for your confidence in me. M’Lissa did die under her own power, which, even at the end, was considerable; she seemed to get stronger rather than weaker with age...It is not for killing her – in the name of the suffering she caused – that I am guilty. I do not, by the way, want this known. (237 - 8)

And then she confesses in a letter to her husband’s dead lover Lisette,

Then there’s Olivia...I told her I did not kill the *tsunga* M’Lissa. I killed her all right. I placed a pillow on her face and lay across it for an hour. (260)

Her disingenuousness undermines the credibility of the other narrators. It becomes difficult to know whether to believe Tashi who conceals, obscures and often misrepresents herself and others, or Olivia who is often outside the narrated events.

Part one of the novel is concerned with memory and remembering. The first four sections are divided between Olivia and Tashi. The story continues somewhat seamlessly until the introduction of Adam interrupts their recollections. Adam’s narrative is presaged by Olivia’s statement: “What most people remembered was strange, because unlike the two of us, they had never been there” (12). The Tashi that Adam remembers is not the same Tashi that Olivia remembers. Adam remembers a Tashi that “was always laughing, and making up stories or flirting cheerfully about the place on errands for her mother”

(14). This gives a sense of a lack of a unified subject whose story has a beginning and an end. Even though with Olivia we have a unified subject whose narrative represents an unproblematic sense of identity, the same is not true for Tashi, Pierre, Adam and Lissette. Unlike Olivia, Adam is not invested with the text's moral authority; he has a stake in Tashi's suffering, however small. For instance he refuses to discuss Tashi's suffering with his congregation, preferring instead to exalt the suffering of Jesus. Pierre, the would-be benevolent anthropologist occupies dual identities in terms of race and sexuality. In fact Lissette and Pierre are marginal characters whose narratives are annotative rather than essential. However, even such annotations are crucial to an overall understanding of Tashi's story, because the same event in the text is seen from different angles, and narrated many times over by different characters to create a plurality of voices. Such non-linear narrative strategy, according to Hutcheon, is one of the ways by which postmodernism forces us to question the ways by which we understand reality. She explains that "by making representation into an issue [again] postmodernism challenges our mimetic assumptions about representation (in any of its 'scrambled menu' meanings): assumptions about its transparency and common-sense naturalness" (1989: 32).

Sometimes an event is told through a third-person account, from another character, which infuses it with layers of meaning. One such event is Torabe's sickness and eventual death. We hear Torabe's story from Pierre, who heard it from his mother Lissette, who heard it from Adam. Sometimes there are many versions of the same event which force the reader to take part in the narrative, to choose whom to believe. An example of this is the question of whether Tashi murdered M'lissa or not; is she lying or delusional? Such funhouse mirror representations, together with Tashi's multiple

identities – Tashi narrates her sections as Tashi, Tashi-Evelyn, Evelyn, Evelyn-Tashi, etc. – speak not only of the text’s postmodernism but highlight its attempt to offer as many points of view as possible, its multiculturalist agenda. However, at other points we get the same version of an event from different sources, perhaps to underscore its veracity, thus undermining the multiculturalist agenda. For example, there is only one version of Torabe’s death. But the novel’s consistent and conscious references to other texts evince Walker’s awareness that everything has already been said.

Identifying Walker’s *Possessing the Secret of Joy* as a postmodernist text does not however, insulate it from charges of misreading and cultural imperialism. Even though postmodernist strategies have a lot to offer in terms of plurality, alternative discourses and histories, and interesting ways to think about culture, each writer revises them with each use. Furthermore, not all postmodernist works take these strategies to their logical conclusion, as Hutcheon (1989) again argues – an artefact can have what she calls a tangential relation to postmodernism. She explains that, for instance, television “in its *unproblematized* reliance on realist narrative and transparent representational conventions, is pure commodified complicity, without the critique needed to define the postmodern paradox” (1989: 10). Although television has evolved a lot since Hutcheon’s exposition, the point she makes is relevant to the way postmodernism is perceived: that a text can be complicit with hegemonic discourses while attempting to break away from them. This is the kind of relation that Walker’s *Possessing* has with postmodernism. It relies on an unproblematized representation of Africans. This again relates to the text’s relation to the past, because even though Walker resituates the past in the present and forces the two to co-exist, her return to the past is not marked by distance. As Hutcheon

explains, in postmodernism there is no simple return to the past because, “one never returns to the past without distance” (10) and in postmodernism this distance is signalled by irony. The postmodernist impulse is to parody what has already been said, because post-modernism views everything as if it has already been said, and only through irony and parody can what has already been said be reconsidered (1988: 34). It is this lack of irony that undermines Walker’s postmodernist intentions.

Further, her text’s tendentiousness attenuates its postmodernist ambitions, and aligns it more with postcolonialism. Postcolonial discourse is after all concerned with not only resisting past representations, but also creating something new from them. Like postmodernism, postcolonialism makes use of the past in trying to understand the present. And like postmodernism, it is not monolithic. For instance, now it is more accurate to speak of postcolonialisms because colonialism was experienced differently by former colonies. Unlike postmodernism however, postcolonial discourse does not have to contend with accusations of being apolitical, because it concerns itself with redressing the colonial legacy of inequalities. Admittedly, it is strange to collocate a reading of Walker’s novel as an Africanist text with a reading of the selfsame text as postcolonial. Having compared the novel to texts like Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* – the quintessential colonialist text against which most postcolonial writers write – to then situate it in postcolonial discourse might seem like a contradiction at first. But, I want to suggest that in Walker’s text postcolonialism, like postmodernism, is simply a strategy that masks and at times advances the text’s political motives.

Sometimes Walker’s novel reads like a catalogue of all the stereotypes about Africa and Africans, and at times there is a conscious attempt to subvert and question

these stereotypes. For instance Ricciardi's book is held up to ridicule for its racism. At one point in the novel, the characters read and criticise Ricciardi's *The African Saga* and the reader is invited to join Walker in trying to see beyond texts like Ricciardi's, to question along with the characters the motive for dissemination of such images about the Africans. When Tashi asks,

Why don't they just steal our land, mine our gold, chop down our forests, pollute our rivers, enslave us to work on their farms, fuck us, devour our flesh and leave us alone? Why must they write about how much joy we possess? (255)

it is up to the intrepid reader to recognise in this lament traces of a similar statement by the most credible critic of colonialism, Franz Fanon, when he suggested that

Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding people in its grip and emptying the native's brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys. (1995: 154)

Perhaps in anticipation of criticisms of cultural chauvinism and imperialism, Walker borrows from postcolonial discourse to legitimise her representation. By using "African words" she mimics postcolonial writers like Chinua Achebe, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and others. But her use of these words is decorative rather than political. Where African postcolonial writers use such words to indicate an alternative worldview, and to resist the colonial language, in *Possessing* these words have no meaning outside the text. One might even argue that these words are derived from English; a simple association of words and concepts can produce the word *barash* (the novel's Olinka word for water) from "brackish" and *tsunga* from sunna. In fact a close reading of *Possessing* shows that Africans have no language at all besides English. How else are we to understand Mbat's explanation to Tashi that "the African does not call his or her house a 'hut'"(255)? Where most postcolonial writers were eager to show that Africans had a history and language

that pre-existed colonialism, Walker's Africans have no history prior to Marcel Griaule's ethnographic text. In collapsing the continent into an ideological cultural block and denying its heterogeneity Walker breaks away from her postcolonial intentions, and this is compounded by the description of the Olinkans themselves: the boys with their "knobby knees and shaved heads. Their near nakedness;" the men with "seedlike tribal markings on their cheeks and the greasy amulets they wore around their necks" and finally the women with "long flat breasts... who work barebreasted, with babies on their breasts" (13), images so ubiquitous in Western discourse, and in particular popular culture that they go without saying.

While singular in purpose – to "eradicate" female circumcision in Africa – Walker's *Possessing* straddles many literary genres and thus defies easy categorisation. It is perhaps her singularity of purpose that blinds her to the imperialism of many of her assertions. By failing to question her own positioning in relation to the African women on whose behalf she speaks, and viewing female circumcision as a crisis that warrants intervention by all means, she, like Mirella Ricciardi takes it upon herself to articulate Africa's problems and solve them. A close reading of her text shows that she does not necessarily dispute Ricciardi's assertion that Africans live by the code "birth, copulation and death;" instead she's appalled at their bungling of the "copulation" part. Walker's Africans, like Ricciardi's, are "natural" they are still "surviv[ing] the suffering and humiliation inflicted upon them" (1981: 147). Thus they continue to be victims of anything from AIDS to female circumcision and an unawareness of their sexuality.

With her portrayal of Africans as victims, it is inevitable that Walker links female circumcision with AIDS. The advent of AIDS seemed to undermine the technological

advance and progress of the West, because it was something that Western science could not curb. And so just as inevitably it had to come from an unknown and unknowing place, as Susan Sontag points out in *AIDS as a Metaphor*: “one feature of the usual script for plague: the disease invariably comes from somewhere else” (1988: 47). Sontag continues

Thus, illustrating the classic script for plague, AIDS is thought to have started in the “dark continent,” then spread to Haiti, then to the United States and to Europe... It is understood as a tropical disease: another infestation from the so-called Third World. (52)

Thus in Western popular discourse AIDS was understood as the disease of the other, and locating its source in Africa meant a reactivation of “a familiar set of stereotypes about animality, sexual license, and blacks” (52). Walker makes no attempt to break away from such stereotypical representations of AIDS and Africa. Her Africa as a place of savage rites, barbarity and inhumanity cannot help but produce AIDS. She collapses two popular myths about the origin of AIDS, the first being that it was transferred from monkeys found in Africa to humans, and the second that AIDS was brought to Africa by Western scientists. In both myths Africans are victims of either the West or their questionable cultural and sexual practices, otherwise how could the disease move from monkeys to humans? In the novel, Hartford, a dying medical student, confesses to Adam that he worked in such a lab, where scientists from America, Australia, New Zealand and other countries bred monkeys and chimpanzees and had them decapitated in order to develop a vaccine to sell to the whole world. After Hartford gives graphic details of his work in this lab, where they dismember monkeys and chimpanzees, and remarks on the human-like quality of these animals (247 –250), there is speculation that this is how he

contracted the disease. Although it is clear that Walker blames these scientists for bringing AIDS to Africa, she portrays Africans as complicit in their demise. And as already mentioned, with its lurid details of African sexuality and sexual practices, the text makes an easy connection between female circumcision and AIDS.

Having read Walker's text as postmodernist, at least in intention, the point is not whether her representation is truthful or not, or whether there is a real Africa that can be recovered and represented, but the agency of the text's subject. After all, Edward Said warns us: "in any instance of at least written language, there is no such thing as delivered presence, but a re-presence, or a representation" (1978: 21). Thus he suggests, when dealing with a representation, "the things to look for are style, figure of speech, setting, narrative devices, historical and social circumstances, *not* the correctness of the representation nor its fidelity to some great original" (21). Thus even if Walker's text is amenable to both the postmodern and the postcolonial, it still does nothing to disrupt the discursive hegemonies that have always put Africa and Africans at the bottom rung of humanity. Her intentions are laudable, but her style, figure of speech, setting, and so on betray them.

Chapter 2

Audacious Women And Wilful Victims: A Reading Of Womanist Politics In *The Color Purple* And *Possessing The Secret Of Joy*

Black groups digging on white philosophies ought to consider the source. Know who's playing the music before you dance¹

The above quotation from Nikki Giovanni provides an apt opening to a chapter about Alice Walker's position in relation to mainstream feminism, implying as it does the relevance of one's identity or cultural background to one's politics. That is, as important as unity and sisterhood are to feminist politics, the women who form the idealistic universal sisterhood do not come from a homogeneous cultural background, and feminism itself does not spring from a political vacuum. Thus, most feminists speak from a particular culture and it is their understanding of that culture and world that shapes their feminist views. In her collection of essays *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* (1984), Walker foregrounds her African American identity and explores how it affects her understanding of feminist politics. She argues that while many black women may take a lot from mainstream feminism, they also have to question its racism and individualism. Thus Walker heeds Giovanni's warning in that she pays attention to the identity of feminists as well as the feminist message. Her womanist vision advocates another feminist expression for Black women – one that pays attention to race and sexuality rather than focusing exclusively on womanhood as the unifying factor.

In this chapter I examine Walker's use of womanism as an alternative discourse for African American women and follow its praxis in two of her novels, *The Color*

¹ Giovanni Nikki (1971) *Gemini* New York: Penguin (Quoted by Hill Collins, P. 1991. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment* New York: Routledge

Purple and Possessing the Secret of Joy. I also place Walker's womanism in the larger frame of Black feminist thinking and other interpretative strategies for thinking about gender as articulated by Patricia Hill Collins, Chandra Mohanty, Barbara Smith, Paula Giddings and Oyeronke Oyewumi among others, in order to explore its relevance and its implications for – not to mention its applicability to – African women.

Walker's womanist theory, like Barbara Smith's call for black feminist criticism, is intended to counter the ideological shortcomings of mainstream feminism by addressing the issue of race. Walker, like Audre Lorde, Toni Morrison, Barbara Smith, and many others before her tries to articulate a theory of gender that recognises difference in terms of race and sexuality, because she feels that mainstream feminism does not address such differences adequately. Walker's frustration with mainstream feminism is better illustrated by Patrocínio P. Schweickart's (1989) essay on reader-response criticism, "Reading ourselves: Toward a feminist Theory of Reading," where she examines what it means to read as a woman. Schweickart uses three "stories" of reading drawn from Wayne Booth's Presidential Address to the MLA in 1982, an excerpt from *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* and another from Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* to highlight some of the issues facing women as readers, writers and critics. Schweickart sets up Booth's sanguine story of reading against those of Malcolm X and Virginia Woolf to show that Booth's story omits the effects of race and sex in reading. She argues that by omitting the problems of race and sex Booth's story is utopian in two senses, the first being that its hero is "fantastically privileged" because he is affirmed by what he reads. Where Woolf and Malcolm X experience exclusion and subjugation, the hero in Booth's story, as a white male, "is assured by the people around him, by the

culture, that he is right for the part” (121, emphasis added). Booth’s story is also utopian in the sense that it “anticipates what might be possible, what ‘critical understanding’ might mean for *everyone*, if only we overcome the pervasive systemic injustices of our time” (121). Schweickart then concludes that reader response criticism is constituted in the same two utopian senses in that it often overlooks issues of race and class while at the same time anticipating a time when such issues are irrelevant. She explains it thus:

The different accounts of reading experience that have been put forth overlook the issues of race, class and sex, and give no hint of the conflicts, sufferings, and passions that attend these realities. The relative tranquillity of the tone of these theories testifies to the privileged position of the theorist. . . . Surely we need to be able to talk about reading without worrying about injustice. (121)

Schweickart therefore suggests a kind of reading that acknowledges the realities of difference, and she feels that feminist criticism is that kind of reading. She states; “But for now reader-response criticism must confront the disturbing implications of our historical reality. . . . To put the matter plainly, reader-response criticism needs feminist criticism” (121).

Schweickart’s analysis, however, is itself a story of omissions, because even as she mentions race, class and sexuality, she does not offer stories that illustrate the problems of reading that attend such differences. If she does, her understanding of such differences is limited to black men (Malcolm X) and white women (Virginia Woolf). The fact that she does not consider, for instance, a black woman’s story of reading worth telling affirms Barbara Smith’s assertion that

Black women’s existence, experience, and culture and the brutally complex systems of oppression which shape these are in the real world of white and/or male consciousness beneath consideration, invisible, unknown. (1986: 168)

Thus even as feminist theorists interrogate the androcentric situation of reading, they do not go far enough in doing so, for instance to the intersection of race and gender or race and sexuality, and are therefore susceptible to biases of their own.

Such biases inform Walker's scathing attack on white feminist scholars' tendency to privilege their experiences of womanhood and pass them off as experiences of all women, their failure to recognise difference in terms of sexuality, gender, race, and class and instead inscribe such difference as deviance. In one of her essays "One Child of One's Own", she writes,

It is, apparently, inconvenient, if not downright mind straining, for white women scholars to think of black women *as women*, perhaps because "woman" (like "man" among white males) is a name they are claiming for themselves and themselves alone. Racism decrees that if *they* are now women. . . . Then black women must perforce be something else. (1984: 376).

However this does not mean that Black feminist criticism is immune to elisions of its own, as Barbara Smith points out. Even as black women critics consider what it means to read as a black woman, they do not pay enough attention to Black lesbian literature (1986: 168).

Walker's womanist theory, then, holds such appeal for most black feminist theorists because it alludes to sexual difference within gender categories, race and class. It is a formulation that seems to recognise the multiplicity of difference, and encourages various expressions of identity and difference. Within the growing canon of black feminist thought of the time, Walker's womanism stood out in its focus on sexual diversity within the category "black women". Defined as an alternative to feminism, Walker's womanism reverses the process of "othering" by creating an exclusive doctrine for black women which is superior to feminism, because Walker's womanism is more –

than feminism, “As purple is to lavender” (1984: xi). Walker describes womanism in terms of emotionality, spirituality and sexuality. Womanism is meant to encompass all the qualities that feminism lacks. Walker’s womanist term is derived from “black folk expression” and is defined as

A black feminist or feminist of color. ... Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or *willful* behaviour. ... A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women’s culture. ... Committed to the survival of entire people, male *and* female. Not a separatist, except periodically for health.... Traditionally universalist.... Loves music... Loves the Folk. Loves herself. *Regardless.* (xi)

As a departure from a movement that many perceived to be characterised by individualism and militant opposition to patriarchy, Walker’s womanism is less concerned with dismantling patriarchy and more concerned with the well-being of the black community as a whole.

However, as I intend to show with my reading of Walker’s *The Color Purple* and *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, even such an all-encompassing theory as womanism is just as short-sighted as mainstream feminism. Womanism is just as prone to the same totalising tendencies and cultural chauvinism that plague second wave mainstream feminism. Developed as an alternative discursive strategy to feminism, Walker’s womanism is couched in resistance and opposition. As a discourse of resistance against a discourse of resistance (after all Julia Kristeva suggests that feminism as a “practice can only be negative. ... at odds with what already exists” [1980: 103]), Walker’s womanism has the task of dismantling something that is itself in the process of dismantling something else. Thus womanism, like feminism, has what Kristeva calls the “negative function” of having to “reject everything... definite, structured, loaded with meaning, in the existing society” (103). It must therefore be as limited as feminism in that it cannot

just be descriptive but has to be prescriptive as well. The danger of conflating the recognition of gender as a category of analysis and prescribing gender as a category of analysis is thus always imminent. For instance in their zeal to dismantle patriarchy wherever it rears its ugly head, most feminist scholars have universalised their conceptual systems and epistemologies, especially gender as an interpretative category. Thus like feminism, womanism is susceptible to distortions when it is transplanted to any culture, nation, space or historical period.

Reading as a womanist: “audacious” women

In her essay, “Womanism Revisited: Women and the (Ab)use of Power in *The Color Purple*,” Tuzyline Jita Allan (1994) argues that while most critics have focused on the supportive, nurturing relations between women in *The Color Purple*, not much attention has been paid to the abuse of power by women in the novel. As she puts it,

[While] Walker’s recreation of the dynamics of power in *The Color Purple* clearly focuses on women’s solidarist attitudes, the radical nature of her womanist imaginary is overlooked by attempts to locate women in the novel outside the sphere of destructive power play (1994: 89).

The close relationships between women in *The Color Purple* is something that they work towards. They work through many forms of self-sabotage before they reach the sisterhood ideal. Therefore to understand Walker’s womanist vision, the mutually destructive relationships that women form in the novel need more critical attention. Allan explains

In *The Color Purple* [womanist behaviour] takes the form of an investigative interest in the exercise of power, not only by men against women, but also fundamentally by women against each other (1994: 90)

This means that with her representation of abusive power relations between women in *The Color Purple*, Walker broadens her interrogation of oppression beyond simple

oppositions of race, sex and class that focus too much on the oppression of black men by a white society or black women by black men or white men etc. Allan continues,

In other words, through womanist agency Walker has long recognized the need for feminism to reconstruct, if not destabilize, the oppressive subject in order to account for nonmasculinist circuits of power such as localized forms of female sabotage. (90)

Such a broad view of power relations anticipates Walker's explosion of the same theme in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. Whereas *The Color Purple* overtly deals with male abuse of women, and only peripherally with the theme of women-abusive women, the reverse is true for *Possessing*. In *Possessing* male oppression is implied in what seems to be overt abuse of women by women. That is, even though men are implicated in what the novel portrays as the destruction of female sexuality, it is the women themselves who actively destroy each other's bodies. A womanist reading of *The Color Purple* and *Possessing* therefore would pay attention to all representations of women abuse in the novels.

Motherhood is one of the tropes through which Walker explores this destructive power play between women in both novels. The concept of the mother as both an enabler and an obstacle, perhaps nurturing and yet limiting the child's – particularly the female child's – development is at the centre of Walker's womanist definition. Walker derives the term womanist from a mother's admonition to a female child who is "Responsible. In charge. *Serious*" (1984: xi). She explains that the term comes from "the black folk expression of mothers to female children, 'You acting womanish,' i.e., like a woman, usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or *willful* (sic) behaviour" (xi). The womanist in this definition has to rebel against such admonitions to assert herself. Despite this rebellion against the mothers, part of Walker's aim to recover her heritage involves rescuing her black foremothers from oblivion. In her essay "In Search Of Our

Mothers' Gardens," Walker professes her indebtedness to her enslaved great-grandmothers and African foremothers. She describes the condition of her enslaved foremothers as that of stifled artists who were "driven to a numb and bleeding madness by the spring of creativity in them for which there was no release" (1984: 233). She also pays tribute to women like Philliss Wheatley, who endured in extremely adverse conditions and manifested their talent in the limited spaces their society allowed them. She writes; "It is not so much what you sang, as that you kept alive, in so many of our ancestors, *the notion of a song*" (237).

In the same vein, the second part of Walker's definition of womanist casts the mother as a repository of African-American history and traditions, because Walker's womanist is also "[t]raditionally capable, as in: 'Mama, I'm walking to Canada and I'm taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me.' Reply: 'It wouldn't be the first time'" (237). Thus even as Walker identifies the role mothers play in the destructive relationships women have with each other, she interposes a history of black women in America to locate her representation in a particular context, especially in *The Color Purple*. An example of Walker's ambivalence towards mothers and motherhood in *The Color Purple* is the novel's portrayal of motherhood as both a burden and a privilege, as some women abdicate their responsibility as mothers and others are denied the opportunity to become mothers. Celie, the novel's protagonist, is repeatedly raped by a man she believes to be her father and bears two children as a result of that sexual abuse. Both her children are taken away from her in infancy, and the novel begins with her writing letters to God as a way of trying to understand what is happening to her. Celie is also abandoned by her mother who dies "screaming and cussing" at her (*Purple*: 4). That

and the fact that both her children are taken away from her, means that she can be neither daughter nor mother. However Celie later learns that her children are adopted by a family of missionaries who raise them in Africa with the help of her sister Nettie.

In her first letters to God Celie portrays a family torn asunder by sexual and physical violence; a family that is devoid of love and propinquity except perhaps the relationship Celie has with her sister Nettie. Ironically this relationship is implicated in Celie's abuse because she endures Pa's advances and her marriage to Mr. _____ in order to protect Nettie. In fact Celie's abuse is intricately tied to her loyalty to her family, as she puts it in one letter:

Maybe cause my mama cuss me you think I kept mad at her. But I ain't. *I felt sorry for mama.* Trying to believe his story kilt her. Sometimes he be looking at Nettie, *but I always git in his light.* (*Purple: 7* emphasis added)

In both these instances Celie takes responsibility for something that she cannot control, she sympathises with someone who is verbally abusive to her and takes on (sexual) abuse intended for her little sister. She thus views kinship or family through this prism of loyalty and abuse. To her it is quite difficult enough coping with a family of your own; to extend yourself beyond that is almost unthinkable, as she tells Nettie, "It be more then a notion taking care of children ain't even yourn" (*Purple: 6*).

It is through her relationship with Shug that Celie learns that a family can be a supportive, communal environment. Shug Avery, the feisty blues singer, facilitates Celie's awakening by appreciating her creativity and teaching her self-assertion. Shug embodies Walker's womanist vision, particularly its ambivalence towards motherhood and mothers. Before the introduction of Shug, motherhood is an isolated burdensome role. There is Celie, her mother and stepmother: all three women are trapped in situations

beyond their control, as Celie describes her stepmother, “She walk around like she don’t know what hit her” (*Purple*: 6). These women are all passive and helpless they all put up with Pa/Alfonso’s voracious sexual appetite in stoic passivity and simply bear him children. They do not bond through their experiences but are separated by them. If anything they collude in their own victimisation by Alfonso rather than turn to each other for protection and comfort: for instance, Celie attempts to seduce Alfonso as a way of keeping him away from Nettie (*Purple*: 9). As bell hooks explains, “since the mother is bonded with the father, supporting and protecting his interests, mothers and daughters in this fictive patriarchy suffer a wound of separation, they have no context for unity” (1990: 468). Thus Celie’s mother chooses to believe Alfonso’s story or at least die trying, rather than defend her daughter.

In stark contrast to these self-effacing women Shug is portrayed as a consummate *arriviste* who abandons her children to pursue her happiness. Interestingly though, Celie immediately identifies Shug with her own mother; one of her first impressions when she sees a picture of Shug is that “she more pretty than my mama” (*Purple*: 8). This connection is curious because of the radical difference in the personalities of the two women – unlike Celie’s mother, Shug is ruled only by her desires, and is not fettered by motherhood. Yet it is through Shug that Celie realises her potential as a mother and a woman. Even before Celie embarks on her lesbian relationship with Shug, her nascent love of women is linked to her love for her mother. To return to the passage quoted above, Celie explains; “I don’t even look at mens. That’s the truth. I look at women, tho, cause I’m not scared of them. Maybe cause my mama cuss me you think I kept mad at her. But I ain’t” (8). And later describing sleeping with Shug, Celie says, “What it like?

Little like sleeping with my mama, only I can't hardly remember sleeping with her" (98). This link between these two women, Shug and Celie's mother, signals Walker's intention to revise the notion of motherhood itself rather than individual mothers. While most feminists, notably Nancy Chodorow, have valorised the mother-daughter bond as the cornerstone of women's connection and social activism (in Champagne, 1994: 142) Walker's focus is on the social role of motherhood. Despite her apathy towards her situation, and her misdirected anger at her, Celie does not hate her mother or blame her, which does not necessarily make the mother-daughter relationship sacrosanct or beyond reproach; Walker refuses to put individual mothers on the pedestal, but rather the motherhood role itself. In fact as we later learn in the novel, Celie's mother's enervation is linked to larger social structures of oppression. It is later revealed that Pa is not Celie's father; her father was a successful farmer and businessman, who was lynched by white businessmen out of jealousy, resulting in Celie's mother's trauma. Such a revelation extends the novel's scope beyond the domestic sphere, to encompass larger historical and political issues. Furthermore, Celie becomes a mother through her sexual relationship with Shug. Describing her first sexual encounter with Shug, Celie says, "Then I feels something real soft and wet on my breast, feel like one of my little lost babies mouth. Way after while, I act like a little lost baby too" (97). Thus by linking Shug with Celie's mother, and sexualising motherhood through Shug, motherhood becomes one of the many nurturing roles that women can assume with each other.

Shug complicates even as she invokes the notion of women bonding through motherhood. With the characters of Shug and Sofia, Walker explodes some of the myths associated with black mothers in the American imagination. Patricia Hill Collins (1990)

identifies some of the stereotypical images of black women that she argues reinforce black women's oppression. One of these is the image of the black mother as "super strong". She argues that black male scholars sanctify black motherhood by neglecting to acknowledge the hardships that most black mothers face (116). According to Collins, the pervasive image of black mothers as self-sacrificing and indefatigable is propagated by black men in an attempt to "defend and protect black womanhood" (117). She continues,

Glorifying the strong black mother represents Black men's attempts to replace negative white male interpretations with positive Black male ones. But no matter how sincere, externally defined definitions of Black womanhood – even those offered by sympathetic African-American men – are bound to come with their set of problems. (117)

Though such an image is not exclusively propagated by black male scholars – after all, the "super strong" black woman features in many fictions by African-American women, particularly in Maya Angelou's autobiographies, where the black woman triumphs over almost all adversity – Collins identifies a persistent reactionary stereotype of black womanhood. One of the problems of such a stereotype, Collins adds, is that such an image ignores the inherent diversity in black motherhood and efforts by black women to continually define and keep redefining motherhood for themselves. She explains,

In contrast, motherhood can serve as a site where Black women express and learn the power of self-definition, the importance of valuing and respecting [them]selves, the necessity of self-reliance and independence, and a belief in Black women's empowerment. This tension leads to a continuum of responses. Some women view motherhood as a truly burdensome condition that stifles their creativity, exploits their labor, and makes them partners in their own oppression. Others see motherhood as providing a base for their own self-actualization, status in the Black community and a catalyst for social activism. (117)

According to Collins, because of this tension, motherhood in many black communities takes on many forms, and often becomes a communal responsibility in the form of "bloodmothers, othermothers and women centered networks" (117). It is this "continuum

responses” (117) to motherhood that Walker explores in *The Color Purple*. The characters in the novel respond in different ways to motherhood: for instance, Shug and Sofia are two of the women who see motherhood as burdensome and stifling while Nettie and Corrine embrace motherhood as empowering. And Walker adds men to the many forms of mothering as Albert and Harpo eventually take on the roles of “othermothers” in the novel. As hooks explains, Walker revises the concept of mother so that it is a role that can be occupied by anyone, and that some women in the novel, like

Shug and Sofia rebelliously place themselves outside the context of patriarchal family norms, revisioning mothering so that it becomes a task any willing female can perform, irrespective of whether or not she has given birth (1990: 468)

It is through this extended family setting that the characters in the novel reach their full potential.

As Corrine’s death shows, the limitations that one concept of motherhood and womanhood imposes on women can have dire consequences. Corrine suffers because she conceives family in terms of blood relations – for instance, she does not tell her children that they are adopted – and because she also sees family solely as a nuclear structure. Thus she cannot accept Nettie as a co-mother to her children; she is plagued by self-doubt and dies questioning the very foundation of her own family. Nettie is a threat to Corrine as a possible biological and therefore ‘real’ mother to the children, thus ironically she demands the truth while her survival depends on its suppression. She believes herself to be the mother to Adam and Olivia, only if their ‘real’ mother remains absent. But the text shows the perfidious nature of blood relations by linking Corrine’s doubts to the revelations of Nettie and Celie’s true parentage, which brings about a complete destabilisation of biological identity and kinship as Celie says

My daddy lynch. My mama crazy. All my little half-brothers no kin to me. My children not my sister and brother. Pa not pa. (*Purple*: 151)

The revelation of Celie and Nettie's real father, and the circumstances surrounding his death, as already mentioned, extend the cultural politics of the novel to larger issues of race and class, beyond the domestic sphere of the abuse of black women by black men. Prior to the introduction of a larger political framework – the lynching of Celie's father by white merchants, which marks the capitalist motive behind racism – the novel has focused almost exclusively on patriarchy as a micro-power within the black community. Despite Sofia's mistreatment by the mayor and his family, Celie's intensely personal perspective had privileged the domestic discourse over the public discourse of race and class. The intrusion of racial and class politics into the family scene of the text radically revises the idea of family relations. As Lauren Berlant explains,

In this revised autobiographical tale, racism succeeds sexism as the cause of social violence in the narrative. The switch from a sexual to a racial code, each of which provides a distinct language and a distinct logic of social relations, releases into the text different kinds of questions about Celie's identity. (1993: 216)

However such a shift from personal to political, as critics like Wendy Wall, bell hooks and Jacqueline Bobo have remarked, compromises the novel's narrative. The vehicle for this move from a perspective of an abused semi-literate rural woman, whose ignorance is so abysmal that she can declare, "I don't know where Africa at" (102) to a critique of social issues such as race and economic exploitation, is Nettie's narrative. But even through Nettie's didactic narrative, this shift from domestic to public is not seamless. It seems that racism does not merely succeed sexism as the cause of social violence but completely displaces it. When Celie's true parentage is revealed, along with her inheritance, rape, incest and physical abuse are all simply purged from the text. Celie's

abusive stepfather Alphonso, is now trivialised by Shug into “a bad odor passing through” the house that Celie inherits (207) . As such, Celie and Shug can chase him away with incense (208). Hence, hooks points out:

The tragedy and trauma of incest, so graphically and poignantly portrayed, both in terms of incest-rape and Celie’s sexual healing which begins when she tells Shug what happened, is trivialised as the novel progresses. (458)

In fact, according to hooks, Celie’s story becomes increasingly individualistic as the novel progresses. The traumatic sexual experience she goes through at the beginning of the novel becomes, according to hooks

A curious tale told in part as a strategy to engage and excite the reader’s imagination before attention is diverted towards more important revelations. (458)

It is the inheritance, more than Shug’s politics of sexual liberation and Sofia’s defiance that sets Celie on her way to self-actualisation and strengthens the community of women in the novel.

Though powerful figures in the novel, Sofia and Shug are eventually ridiculed and punished respectively for their radicalism. In her pursuit of a man “a third of [her] age” (*Purple*: 212) Shug loses some of her power to be sexually self-defining. Again hooks aptly observes;

As the novel progresses Shug is depicted as an aging female seducer who fears the loss of her ability to use sex as a means to attract and control men, as a way to power. (458)

Sofia on the other hand is brutally crushed for her defiance, however, with her characterisation Walker deconstructs the myth of the “black mammy.” With Sofia’s character Walker indicts white women for their complicity in economic and sexual exploitation of black women and racial domination. The relationship between Sofia and

Miss Millie, the mayor's wife, shows that there can be no solidarity between black and white women because their relationship is based on class and racial domination. One of the functions of the black mammy image is to conceal the racial and economic exploitation of black women by white families, white women in particular. Collins has argued that the mammy image persists in American culture because it is "central to interlocking systems of race and gender" (1990: 71). The image keeps the black woman in her place, presumably not by force, but because the "black woman wants to serve."

Collins explains

By loving, nurturing, and caring for her white children and "family" better than her own, the mammy symbolises the dominant group's perception of the ideal Black female relationship to elite white male power. (117)

Sofia is forced to work for the mayor's wife, to be her maid and surrogate mother to the mayor's children even though this goes against her character.

Miss Millie sees Sofia only as breeder, nurturer and maid and not as an assertive, independent woman who is more comfortable doing "men's jobs" than taking care of the children. When Sofia does not conform to Miss Millie's image of her, Miss Millie forces her to conform by desexing her: denying her contact with her own children and men. The role of the black mammy is thrust on Sofia regardless of her efforts to resist it. Eleanor Jane "dotes" on Sofia and insists that Sofia "practically" raised her and continues to make a nuisance of herself in Sofia's home even after Sofia has left the mayor's house. Sofia however can see through the two women's attempts to distort her self-image, especially Eleanor Jane's attempts to manipulate Sofia into saying that she loves her son. The final confrontation between Sofia and Eleanor Jane serves to deconstruct the mammy myth and reveal the violence and fear that perpetuate it. Sofia tells Eleanor Jane,

I love children... But all the colored women that say they love yours is lying. They don't love Reynolds Stanley any more than I do. Some colored folks so scared of white folks they claim to love the cotton gin. (*Purple*: 225)

It is only when Eleanor Jane knows all the circumstances pertaining to Sofia's employment in her home that their relationship becomes more honest. Thus in *The Color Purple* womanism facilitates better understanding between black men and women, and between white women and black women. Womanists go through a lot in order to define themselves and their place in the society.

“Wilful” victims: globalising womanism

If, as Tuzyline Jita Allan suggests in the previously mentioned essay,

The idea of black women as agents of their own oppression is yet to take hold within the black feminist discourse in the light of the more urgent need to address the corrosive impact of race and gender oppression on black female identity (1994: 94)

then Walker ushers in an era where it is legitimate to investigate this idea with her portrayal of female circumcision in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. Whereas Walker is ambivalent about the role of women in their destruction, especially the internecine relationships between mothers and daughters in *The Color Purple*, in *Possessing* she explicitly indicts mothers as agents of their daughter's oppression. There are two kinds of mothers in *Possessing*, those who victimise their daughters and those who comply with the victimisation of their daughters by their passivity. These two kinds of mothers are embodied in the characters of M'lissa the circumciser and Catherine, Tashi's mother, who helplessly submits Tashi's sister, Dura, to be circumcised.

The novel tells the story of Tashi's physical, emotional and mental devastation resulting from circumcision. With Tashi, a minor character from Walker's previous

novels, *The Color Purple* and *The Temple Of My Familiar*, Walker claims her prerogative as a writer to “recast or slightly change events alluded to or described in the earlier books, in order to emphasise and enhance the meanings of the present tale” (*Possessing*: 266-7). Thus, whereas in *The Color Purple*, Tashi’s decision to have “the female initiation ceremony” (*Purple*: 202) and the facial scars is portrayed, at best, as a gesture of defiance and an expression of cultural autonomy, or at least as a way of holding on to her dying culture, in *Possessing* they become symbols of her oppression and victimisation. In *Possessing* Tashi no longer chooses to be circumcised or feels compelled to have the ceremony, instead she is conned into having what has now become female genital mutilation, not initiation, by a culture that limits the woman’s role in the society.

In *Possessing* Walker widens her scope in reclaiming the history of black women by going as far back as her African foremothers. She investigates the situation of her enslaved foremother who might have been circumcised. As she explains in an interview with Paula Giddings, in *Possessing* she is speaking on behalf of her

Great-great-great-great-grandmother who came to [America] with all this pain in her body. [Who] in addition to having been captured... might have been genitally mutilated” (1992: 60).

Thus, unlike in *The Color Purple*, where the informant on African culture is Nettie, an African-American missionary, in *Possessing* we get a native informant in Tashi which signals Walker’s intention to explore Africa not simply as a space that merges with America in the term African-American, but as a separate entity. In fact in Walker’s Tashi the crisis of identity that W. E. B Du Bois described in *The Souls of Black Folk* is played

out. According to Du Bois, the black in America is torn between two loyalties, which leave him or her at odds with him/herself. He writes,

One ever feels his twoness, an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (1953: 15)

Tashi embodies the biculturalism of the text, she is an African who emigrates to America and therefore straddles both cultures. The text inscribes the disparity between the two cultures in Tashi's body. Just as Tashi's body is torn asunder by "two unreconciled strivings" the African and American, the text is also riven by "two warring ideals" the African and American cultures. Scarred in Africa and healed in the West, Tashi's body becomes the battleground on which the battle of supremacy of one culture over another is played out. However her body has no "dogged strength" to keep it from being torn asunder. Instead what one culture extirpates another liberates. Africa destroys Tashi's body while America liberates her spirit.

This biculturalism raises interesting questions for Walker's womanist theory. Criticised by many for its insularity and solipsism, is it possible for such a narrowly defined ethic to transgress national boundaries? As a theory that emerges out of a particular history – slavery, classism, racism and sexual oppression in America – one would think it cannot therefore be applied unproblematically in another context. However this is what Walker attempts to do in *Possessing*. With her portrayal of women in the novel it would seem at first that Walker abandons her womanist theory for a feminist one because of her focus on the individual rather than the community, and the prioritisation of the women's agenda over that of the race. Or that the text is one of those instances when a womanist, according to the womanist definition, becomes a "separatist... periodically

for health” (1984: xi). However, a close reading of *Possessing* reveals that Walker radicalises her womanist vision rather than abandoning it. As the reading of *The Color Purple* above shows, womanism is an ideal that is reached by persistent critiquing of social structures that oppress women. As Allan puts it,

The path to womanist victory in Walker’s fiction is strewn with physically and psychically battered women, victimised as much by self-hate as by an oppressive racist and sexist social system. (1995: 70)

Thus womanism taken to its extreme questions and challenges all forms of oppression regardless of culture and space.

However, with the victim status of African women in *Possessing*, it seems that womanism has come full circle: from women who are victims of society, “the mules of world,” to women who have developed a consciousness that gives them agency and subjectivity and back again to the women completely victimised by their society. Tashi as a creature “so abused and mutilated in body” (1974: 232) is a throwback to Walker’s earlier characters, before she arrived at her womanist vision: she is like Mem in *The Third Life Of Grange Copeland* and Celie at the beginning of *The Color Purple*. The difference is that the second time around womanist agency is no longer a burgeoning doctrine, but is something that is fully realised and co-exists with the victimisation of women. To put it another way, in the new situation there is discrimination between those who embody the womanist vision and those who need to be rescued by it.

For instance Raye, the woman who takes over as Tashi’s therapist, after her Jungian therapist dies, resembles Shug and Sofia with her direct manner and honesty. Like a true womanist she is audacious and curious, qualities that offend Tashi as an African woman. She says of Raye’s direct manner,

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 exhibit the graceful subtlety of the African woman (*Possessing*: 111).

Womanism, with its irreverence, liberates black women from constricting notions of womanhood like “graceful subtlety” (111). The conspiratorial wink from the narrator to the reader here is hard to miss – surely the imagined reader cannot share Tashi’s resentment of Raye. What is functioning in this instance is what Wayne Booth (1974) calls stable irony; the novel’s ideal readers, possibly African-American women, are not expected to be abashed at Tashi’s criticism. As Booth explains;

Often the predominant emotion when reading stable ironies is that of joining, of finding and communing with kindred spirits...[E]very irony inevitably builds a community of believers even as it excludes. (1974: 28)

Thus readers are invited to join the author in some higher understanding that excludes Tashi and women like her. African women, with their graceful subtlety are excluded from the truth of womanist audacity; the reader is expected to admire the bluntness of African-American women and see the dangers of African women’s timidity, disguised as “graceful subtlety.” It is also significant that in this section Tashi speaks as her new American self, Evelyn, because as such she is speaking from within the culture she tries to castigate, a culture she is so obviously benefiting from. It is actually in Tashi’s conversations with Raye that the victim-saviour nature of the relationship that the text depicts between African-American women (womanists) and African women is evident. The stark contrast between these two women highlights the difference between the two groups of women. Raye is portrayed as smarter, more evolved and free, overall a better

person than Tashi. For instance, when Raye visits Tashi in Olinka during her murder trial, Tashi remarks,

[Raye's] perky voice seems to come to me from another planet. Women who are not gelded have a different sound I think. They can sound perky. A gelded woman can not. (215)

African women like Tashi, M'lissa, Mbatl, Catherine/Nafa are gelded, mutilated, timid, and barely alive in contrast to women like Olivia and Raye who are lively, saucy, audacious and outspoken. Thus African-American women are the ideal to which African women should aspire, with Raye as the embodiment of that idealised black womanhood.

Raye, like most of the characters in the novel, speaks for the author, and her voice is by far the least disguised. Despite not having a section of her own, or perhaps because of that, Raye is invested with the author's point of view. The fact that she speaks through Tashi, in perhaps the most extreme case of literary ventriloquism, validates and authorises Raye's narrative. She embodies the kind of womanhood that Tashi at first resents, then envies, and finally covets. In a section entitled "Evelyn" Tashi writes of Raye, "I resented her. ... Because she was a woman. Because she was whole. She radiated a calm cheerful competence that irritated me" (107). A page later she describes Raye as a "smoothly dressed woman who walked with a spring in her step and whose brown skin, the color of cinnamon, was flawless" (108). In this instance Tashi negates herself while wholly affirming Raye. Raye's incredulity towards the end of the section, when she cannot even complete her sentence "And yet you gave this up in order to ..." (113) is more likely to resonate with the reader than if this section had been narrated by Raye. Had Raye commented on Tashi's evasiveness in contrast to her own direct manner, Tashi's so-called Olinka shuffle in contrast to her own springy step, Raye would appear

arrogant and self-aggrandising, which would incline the reader to question her objectivity and reliability as a narrator.

More tellingly, had it been Raye who comments on Tashi's "ebony" skin (*Possessing*: 22) in contrast to her own brown cinnamon-coloured skin, the novel's discrimination between African-Americans and Africans on the basis of colour would have been glaringly obvious. But it is still clear that skin colour is crucial to Walker's politics. Like the missionaries and colonisers, her intervention is undergirded by a notion of superiority that is based on skin colour, or in this case, complexion. As Oyeronke Oyewumi argues, the colour coding of Walker's characters in the novel is not coincidental but is part of the "binary Self/Other framework" that the Walker uses to "construct Africans and African-Americans" (2003: 180). For instance African-Americans like Olivia, Raye, Pierre and Tashi and Adam's son Benny are described as "brown", "mahogany", "radiant brown", and the like, while Africans are "dark", "black" and "ebony." Oyewumi suggests that

This construction is not without deeper meaning... The "improvement" of the race signified by alleged browning/lightening/whitening of African Americans is what enables Walker to think that now they/she can play the role of saving Africans from whatever problems she so designs. (182)

Through the character of Raye it becomes clear that Walker does not claim African women as her sisters, but casts herself as their saviour.

Raye's contiguity with her author is confirmed by the fact that, like her author, Raye is a healer. As Tashi describes her, she is not just a healer, but also "a spiritual descendant of the ancient healers who taught our witchdoctors and were famous for their compassionate skill" (*Possessing*: 125 – 6). Healing, a role that Walker also claims for herself in her collection of essays, *In Search of Our Mothers Gardens* where she sees her

writing as a way of helping herself and others heal, is central to the womanist ethic. A womanist heals herself and others. Another character in the novel that has already won her womanist freedom is Olivia, who, like Celie towards the end of *The Color Purple*, has the authority to write not only herself but others. Olivia is tasked with articulating Tashi's struggle and legitimising her discourse.

Authorised and read by others, Tashi's body is an imperfect mirror that reflects back to others what they want to see. In Tashi's broken body African-American women like Raye and Olivia, and for that matter white middle-class women like Lisette, see their "whole" perfect bodies. She does for African-American women's subjectivity what the mad woman in the attic did for Victorian women. In her essay, "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism" Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak argues that in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, Bertha Mason's humanity is questioned in order to validate the coloniser's project of "soul making." Spivak writes of the "epistemic violence of imperialism" which depicts "a self-immolating colonial subject for the glorification of the social mission of the colonizer" (1986: 270). Thus, according to Spivak, Bertha Mason, as a colonial subject, must "set fire to the house and kill herself, so that Jane Eyre can become feminist individualist heroine of British fiction" (270). Just as Bertha Mason is Jane Eyre's imperfect double in Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, Tashi as a non-womanist validates womanism as a liberating doctrine: she must erase herself in order to inscribe Raye, Lisette and Olivia. Thus she begins telling her story by saying "I did not realise for a long time that I was dead" (*Possessing*: 3).

Tashi epitomises Du Bois' double-consciousness, "the sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of the world

that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (1953: 16-17). She sees herself through the eyes of others, particularly her author. However, Tashi’s double-consciousness is not just peculiar but perverse because she sees others only as they would like to be seen. If, as Barbara Christian suggests, stereotypical images of black womanhood often serve “as a reservoir for the fears of Western culture, a dumping ground for those female functions a basically puritan society could not confront” (in Collins 1990: 72) then the African woman serves a similar function for African-American women in Walker’s *Possessing*. She is a dumping ground for all the negative images associated with black womanhood. Where many Black feminists like Toni Morrison, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Audrey Lorde, struggled in their fictions against limiting images of Black women as black and therefore ugly, hardworking drudges, “mules” and as either asexual or over-sexed breeders, Walker does not dispute such stereotypical images in *Possessing*. If anything she reinforces them by projecting them onto African women.

Although her novel is about an African woman’s plight, the focus is on the plight of the Westerners around her, their efforts to comprehend her situation, which inevitably fail because she is not meant to be understood, but to horrify. There are some measures to make Tashi an everywoman, (she is after all renamed in America after the original woman Eve) and to universalise her plight as one of the drastic effects of global patriarchy. However, the narratives of those around her undermine such attempts. Adam, Pierre, Lisette and Olivia are the ones who look “on in amused contempt and pity” at Tashi and her culture that has reduced her to a raving lunatic. For example, during Tashi’s trial Adam remarks of the Olinkans, “They’ve made the telling of the suffering itself taboo” (155). When attending to AIDS patients in an Olinka prison Olivia notes

their incomprehension and speaks of their “dumb patience.” She further remarks, “it is their animal-like ignorance and acceptance that most angers Tashi, perhaps because she is reminded of herself” (233). Such statements abound in the text and they serve to hold Olinkans and their culture as examples of backwardness. Micere Githae Mugo describes Tashi as a “crazy imbecile who is... a burden and liability to the very people that she is dependent upon” (1997:473). The text would have us believe that Tashi’s character flaws resulted from her circumcision, but the persistent depiction of African women as either demonic witches or helpless victims in the novel make such reasoning untenable.

As already mentioned, with her characterisation of the women in *The Color Purple*, for instance Sofia’s strength, Shug’s sexual freedom and the immersion of Mary Agnes in the black community, Walker wreaks havoc with some of the most debilitating stereotypes of black womanhood in her society. She appropriates and subverts the Mammy, Sapphire, Matriarch and the tragic mulatto stereotypes respectively. She turns an oppressive discourse on itself, which makes her uncritical use of the limiting imperialist discourse in *Possessing* all the more perplexing. With the puzzling characterisations such as Tashi’s mother, Catherine/Nafa, who is held responsible for Dura’s “murder” because of her capitulation to this “tradition” and M’lissa the unfeeling circumciser, all the stereotypes about African women are reinforced. In contrast to the demonised M’lissa, Catherine is a meek beast of burden that Tashi describes as having “sunk into the role of ‘She Who Prepares the Lambs for Slaughter’” (259). Catherine’s character is such an enduring figure in colonial literature that she could have leapt from the pages of John Seymour’s *One’s Man Africa*. Recalling an image of her mother walking in front of her, Tashi writes

Those bark-hard, ashen heels trudge before me on the path. The dress above them barely clothing, a piece of rag. The basket of groundnuts suspended from a strap that fits a groove that has been worn into her forehead. When she lifts the basket down, the groove in her forehead remains... African women like my mother give harsh meaning to the expression 'furrowed brow.' (18)

This description echoes Seymour's when he wrote of African women:

Their heads were (and are today) terribly deformed by the stump strap, a piece of rawhide which goes around their foreheads to support the heaviest load, their earlobes were enormously distended by great discs, their clothes were untanned ox-hide, copper wire and beads. They were sullen like over-worked oxen. (in Hammond and Jablow, 1977: 115)

Thus, next to their African-American sisters African women come pitifully short. They might no longer be the white woman's burden, but beasts of burden they continue to be.

The uneasy co-existence between womanists and as yet un-indoctrinated African women in the novel is coded in the destructive mother-daughter relationships. Walker describes Tashi as a "daughter so betrayed" by the mother who "collaborates with [her] destroyer" (1993: 21). By portraying African women as victims of patriarchy and culture, Walker draws on Mary Daly (1978) who described African women as "pawns, mentally castrated participants in the destruction of their own kind; the female token torturers" (1978: 165). They are either too ignorant to see the web of patriarchy or battered beyond caring. The other enduring stereotypical image of African women is that of witches, demonic and powerful. One such woman is M'lissa, Tashi's circumciser, who gets her token say in the novel. M'lissa, herself a victim of the most severe and debilitating form of female circumcision, perpetuates this tradition until she is regarded as a monument of her culture. She resolutely serves a tradition that she admits, makes her, and by extension other African mothers who allow their daughters to be circumcised, "torturers of children" (*Possessing*: 210).

Unlike in *The Color Purple* where it is the role of motherhood that is interrogated rather than individual mothers, in *Possessing*, the reverse is true; motherhood is idealised, and certain kinds of mothers indicted for their bad mothering. Catherine, M'lissa and Tashi, almost all the African women in the novel, are bad mothers who have no useful "tradition" to pass on to their daughters. If, as bell hooks argues, sisterhood in *The Color Purple* displaces "motherhood as a central signifier for female being", motherhood as a social role takes centre stage in *Possessing*. In the novel, women like Raye and Olivia are more mothers than sisters to their African counterparts, and they are positive examples of strong, supportive mothers. In fact, Tashi, as a now hybridised African-American, Tashi-Evelyn, takes on the mothering role to one of her African sisters. By becoming a surrogate mother to Mbatia, a young woman who testifies in her murder trial, the now enlightened Tashi takes on the role of teaching her and passing on good myths and traditions to her. She simply claims her: "I am this child's mother. Otherwise she would not have appeared so vividly, a radiant flower of infinite freshness, in my life" (*Possessing*: 255). A few paragraphs later Tashi hands Mbatia a doll, a legacy of "wholeness" that should be passed on to future generations of daughters;

I have kept the little sacred figure of Nyanda – I have named her, choosing a word that floated up while I held her in my hands – carefully wrapped in my most beautiful scarf. The one of deep blue with gold stars scattered over it, like the body of Nut, goddess of Africa, and the night sky. I take it from my pocket where I have been keeping it since I learned I would be executed, and place it in Mbatia's hands. This is for my granddaughter, I say. Your little doll! she says, touched. You know, she says, unwrapping it, it looks like you. No I say, 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... (256).

This passage is quoted at length to emphasise the ritualistic and ceremonial nature of the exchange between the two women. For instance the doll is named intuitively, from the

subconscious, with the presence of the scarf invoking an Egyptian Goddess of the sky Nut, Tashi is not simply passing on tradition, but a hope for regeneration.

Without labouring a point made in the previous chapter, it is quite curious that Egypt is again called into the service of creating an African history, tradition and mythology. Nut, the Egyptian Goddess of the sky here becomes an African goddess. And as Paul Gilroy has pointed, out, “the truth of racialized being is sought, not in the world, but in the psyche” (1992: 306). Names float up from the unconscious, for Tashi it is the name Nyanda for the doll, while for her author, place names like Olinka, and words like *tsunga*, are also drawn from the psyche, as the author claims in the epistle to the reader,

Tsunga, like many of my ‘African’ words, is made up. Perhaps it, and other words I use, are from an African language I used to know, now tossed up in my unconscious. (267)

This is perhaps the most crucial flaw of the text, that in attempting to deal with something that it wants us to believe is real, it draws on the implausible. For instance Tashi narrates her own death. It is difficult to tell when exactly the story of *Possessing* ends; is it when Tashi dies by a firing squad, or with the note to the reader, or with the thanks to people as diverse as Robert Allen, Walker’s erstwhile lover or Carl Jung?

Talking Books: Writing the Self into Being and The Influence of Slave Narratives

In her essay “Writing the Subject, Writing the Self” bell hooks (1990) observes what she feels is an oft-ignored discrepancy in Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*, and that is the act of writing itself. She argues that it is hard to believe that someone as trampled on and abused as Celie could find the time and space to write her letters to God. For hooks Celie’s letter writing is one of the most “fantastical happenings” in the novel which she

argues, is concealed by the fact that we never actually see her writing (466). In fact apart from the section where she starts writing to Nettie instead of God, Celie rarely refers to the act of writing. According to hooks Celie “must remain invisible so as not to expose this essential contradiction – that as a dehumanised object she projects a self in the act of writing even as she records her inability to be self-defining” (466). Considering what the concealment of the fictional nature of Celie’s writing allows Walker to do with Celie’s character, this observation is crucial. By erasing Celie in this way Walker participates in the image-making process that her novel is trying to resist. However, as Lauren Berlant suggests, this problem can be mediated if we take Celie’s written word as spoken, that the novel is “a talking book” (1993: 215). According to Berlant, Celie speaks through her silence. Berlant uses the example of the crossed out “I am” in the novel’s opening lines, to argue that Celie cancels herself out even as she writes herself. Berlant explains:

Lost in the wilderness of unnamed effects, Celie is nonetheless able to resist her silence by embodying for God’s (and the reader’s) benefit the generic scene of female humiliation... Stripped of any right to the privacy of her body and sentenced to vocal exile, she manages to “speak” in public by becoming a talking book, taking on her body the rape, incest, slave labor and beating that would otherwise be addressed to other women, “her sisters.” (215)

Thus Celie disappears so that other women may thrive. She must, however, step forward as an exemplum as Berlant continues:

Celie’s response to these incursions into her autonomy is to enter history for the first time – not really by “asking another woman for her underwear,” but by crossing out “I am” and situating herself squarely in the ground of negation. (215).

Both Celie and Tashi are sacrificial lambs: silenced in order to voice the wider oppression of women. In *Possessing*, Walker uses the rarest and severest form of female

circumcision to highlight the effects of this practice on women who undergo it. Tashi has to die so that the estimated “ninety to one hundred million women and girls living today in African, Far Eastern and Middle Eastern countries [who] have been genitally mutilated” (*Possessing*: 266) can be saved. If Tashi survives what has been done to her then female circumcision is not as debilitating as the novel wants to make it out to be. Like Mary Daly, Hanny Lightfoot-Klein and many other Western feminists before her, Walker sees female circumcision as a kind of death. Actually, Mary Daly hesitates to call what circumcised women live “living.” In *Gyn/Ecology*, referring to forms of female circumcision as ritualised atrocities, she writes,

Those who physically survive these atrocities “live” their entire lifetimes, from early childhood or from puberty, preoccupied by pain. (1978: 156)

If these women are incapable of surviving what is done to them, how can they tell their stories? It is here that *Possessing* and *The Color Purple* both stretch the limits of storytelling as both go beyond fiction into fantasy. Walker tries in her *Possessing*, to depict that “life” by portraying Tashi, and women like her as psychically dead. Tashi, like M’lissa and Mbatl, are in one way or another dead because they are not whole. But Walker does not stop at portraying these women as lacking the *elan vital* of their Western counterparts like Raye, Lisette and Olivia; she questions their humanity.

In a sense Walker is confronted with the same problem that confronted slave narrators, in that she writes for a cause, and as in the case of slave narratives, a first-person account is much more credible and sonorous than a third-person one. However, an articulate account of the protagonist’s suffering would undermine that suffering and humiliation; that is, if the protagonist lives to tell the tale, then slavery – or female

circumcision or women abuse – is not so debilitating. Jean Phoenix Laurel explains the dilemma of slave narrators thus:

Slave narrators had to show that they had been hurt mentally and emotionally, as well as physically by slavery. Because of this hurt, readers were forced to conclude that slavery must be abolished. Yet at the same time slave narrators had to maintain the posture of credible witness to events and causal consequences that readers well might have dismissed as unbelievable. Because of this credibility, readers were forced to conclude that the slave was a rational human being deserving of freedom. Taken together, these competing imperatives forced the narrator into a paradoxical presentation of self as both harmed and able to transcend that harm, as both debased and untouched by that debasement (1996: 2)

Tashi transcends this harm by writing from beyond the grave. Tashi begins from a living death, and ends with a kind of literal, but liberating death. Her narrative is also framed by other, more credible and sane voices that articulate her humiliation. Those around her describe the physical devastation caused by circumcision. Olivia, her friend from childhood, and sister-in-law, is the one tasked with explaining Tashi's actions. While according to Laurel, in slave narratives portraying the protagonist as mad was taboo as that would undermine the reliability of the narrator (1996: 5) Walker's protagonist is "unquestionably mad" (*Possessing*: 157). Thus, the narratives of Olivia, Adam, Lisette and others are important in authenticating the text. Such a representation is problematic and falls into the trap that slave narratives tried to avoid: that of creating a distant, passive reader. Where slave narrators wanted solidarity from their audiences, Walker's text creates a "cultural-critic- in-the-armchair" who is "forced to adopt a position outside the narrative, reading characters as signifiers within a totalizing structure which points doggedly to one, and only one allegorical meaning" (Laurel, 1997: 9). Adam's mistress, Lisette, provides such a critic. Recalling the story of a sadistic Olinkan husband, Torabe, she writes,

We are the perfect audience, mesmerized by our conscious knowledge of what men, with the collaboration of our mothers, do to us. (131)

Walker's graphic and gratuitous depictions of bodily mutilation can only induce horror and pity from the novel's target audience, not solidarity. Tina McElroy Ansa's review of Walker's *Possessing* is a perfect example of such response. She writes,

The idea of female circumcision and Walker's handling of it is something that remains with one long after finishing Tashi's story. It is difficult to wash oneself without imagining Tashi's wound; to make love, to bend over comfortably in the garden, to sprint to the ringing telephone without thinking how labored, how painful, how nearly impossible all these quotidian actions would be if one's vulva was mutilated. (1992: 33)

By catering for such audiences the humiliations that the novel portrays are reduced to mere spectacles. In Tashi's "mutilation" Ansa finds affirmation.

Both *Purple* and *Possessing* have a problematic relationship to slave narratives.

As hooks points out for *Purple*, the novel only parodies slave narratives. She argues that

With the publication of slave autobiographies, oppressed African-American slaves moved from object to subject, from silence into speech, creating a revolutionary literature – one that changed the nature and direction of African-American history; laid the groundwork for the development of a distinct African-American literary tradition. (1990: 464)

Walker does draw heavily on the literary tradition of slave narratives with the exhortative nature of her narratives in both *Possessing* and *Purple*, to conceal the individualistic nature of these stories. But her text does not share the agenda of the slave narratives. The text narrates the suffering and humiliation of the protagonist as an end rather than as a means to an end. According to hooks, Celie's plight is individual, her author parodies "the slave narrative's focus on racial oppression" and emphasises "sexual oppression acts to delegitimize the specificity and power of this form" (465). Although it may be a bit extreme to charge Walker with robbing slave narratives of their meaning by appropriating

the form, she does misuse it. hooks' suggestion highlights the fact that without grounding her narrative in some communal agenda, the stories of these women become mere spectacles of suffering that are intended to sensationalise the issue instead inspiring solidarity. Whether it's the backwash of women abuse of or female circumcision, the focus on the spectacle of humiliation and physical debilitation conceals some of the textual inconsistencies.

Furthermore, as books that bring themselves into being, the narrative strategies in both novels divert our attention away from the authorial presence in the books. In both books, the voices remain those of appropriated others: "interpreted – translated – represented as authentic, unspoiled" (hooks, 1990: 466). In *Purple* the epistolary form of the novel, which emphasises writing as a form of self-creation (the letter writer after all actively constructs a fictional self) facilitates the talking book narrative strategy, especially since Celie's letters are never read. Thus Celie can create herself in private, and the reader invades a private space. Many critics have remarked on the voyeuristic positioning of the reader of *The Color Purple*. Wendy Wall for instance points out:

The epistolary form complicates the notion of audience, making the reader a voyeur (like Albert) to a private intimate confession. This is an unsettling position; reading is portrayed as an act of intrusion, of violation. (1993: 271)

In these talking book narratives, Celie and Tashi appear to be, to use Gayatri Spivak's term, self-constituting subjects (1988: 271). Their author claims to know them in a simple way, because they have in effect authored themselves. In *Purple*, Walker claims to be the medium through which the novel's characters speak, and in *Possessing*, she is practically speaking for herself in speaking for Tashi, because Tashi represents a distant relative.

However, Spivak warns, such representations result in distortions because the role of ideology in subject constitution cannot be ignored (1988: 271-2).

It's all in the family: Reading family politics in *Purple* and *Possessing*

The Color Purple ends with a family gathering that includes former antagonists such as Albert and Celie, Sophia, Harpo and Mary Agnes as well as Celie's African family. The family reunion is meant to tie together all the fragments of the story. It represents the ideal family that the novel has been working towards. The portrayal of family relations in the novel functions as a metaphor for race relations. The Olinka, Walker's fictional African tribe in the novel, believe that race relations would improve if everybody treated everyone as if they were all God's children "or one's mother's children no matter what they look like or how they act" (*Purple*: 233). According to the Olinka myth of creation, white people are black people's children. The Olinka creation myth is similar to the Judeo-Christian one, but in the Olinka myth Adam was not the first man, but the first white man so "everybody notice the first white man cause he was white" (233). When Olinka women started to have white children, the children were killed because the Olinka did not want difference; they wanted everybody "to be just alike" (233). Adam was the first white man that the Olinkans did not kill, but he was thrown out for being "colorless". The white people in this myth are angry to be thrown out for being different, so they resolve to crush black people wherever they see them, just like the serpent in the Judeo-Christian myth.

But the Olinkans can see a future where the roles are reversed, and the black people crush the white people and this cycle continues on and on unless they stop "making somebody the serpent" by accepting difference (233). Racial conflict in this

parable is linked to familial conflict. It is through the nuclear family system, in its insistence on conformity and similarity that difference is denied and rejected. The novel displaces this family system with the extended model, which allows for difference. The displacement of the nuclear family with the extended and communal one is a response to the denial of blood relations between the white and the black people in the novel. Mary Agnes is one such example of the denial of blood relations between black and white people, in that her white uncle rapes her when she tries to get Sofia out of jail. Her eventual acceptance in the new family is part of that effort to redefine the way in which families are constructed. Celie's new family is based on acceptance of difference.

Sofia and Mary Agnes end up sharing mothering responsibilities, which, many critics suggest, replicates some forms of extended family models in Africa. For instance Gay Wilentz (1992) suggests that the communal family model that Walker adapts in her novels, starting with *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* to *The Color Purple*, has its roots in African family organisation systems, and is Walker's way of "bring[ing] to life the positive values of her culture's unique Afrocentric qualities" (1992: 62). Wilentz explains:

So throughout generations, African values and family organization have continued from first Africans in slavery, although these lifestyles have often been disrupted and imposed upon by "poverty, discrimination and institutional subordination." In *The Color Purple*, it is evident that the seeds of the residual extended family system remain with the two sisters and, as the novel progresses, Celie and Nettie join with other women – sisters-in-law, significant others, "co-wives" – and the men they live with to rebuild an extended family structure which allows them freedom to grow. (1992: 68).

Walker's corpus therefore shows her indebtedness to African family organisations. But in her text these organisations are revised and rehabilitated to suit the new situation. The underlying implication is that in their original form, for instance in Africa, such family

organisations can be oppressive. For instance the African family structure in the novel is abusive, intolerant and oppressive. The novel even attributes the slave trade to the African family's failure to tolerate difference. For instance Nettie relates to Celie the story of a woman who was sold to the trader because she no longer fit^{ted} into the village life (*Purple*: 136). Thus, the novel's re-articulation of the extended family system is what liberates African-American women in the novel from some persistent stereotypes of black womanhood.

Paul Gilroy (1993) suggests that the trope of race as family runs the risk of locking women into fixed gender roles. In contemporary black nationalism in particular, he adds, the tendency to claim racial authenticity by appealing to some "original African forms and codes" has often meant that "those definitions of authenticity are disproportionately defined by ideas about nurturance, about family, about fixed gender roles, and generational responsibilities" (1993: 307). The novel discards such aspects of the race-as-family concept by radically redefining the sexual relations between men and women. Because this kinship structure is constructed and defined by women, the text avoids some of the pitfalls of the race-as-kinship concept. It cannot resist, however, tapping into the "original African forms and codes" that facilitate the extended family ideal, and rejecting those that are deemed pernicious, like polygamy. This is problematic because it means that the image of an unchanged Africa still trapped in outmoded traditions such as polygamy is left intact.

This ideal family structure is taken further in *Possessing*. As already mentioned, in both *Possessing* and *Purple*, Walker creates a family ideal that is bound by more than just blood relations. Speaking about *Possessing*, she explains in an interview: "I was

never a separatist, but now more than ever before my own life is so multiracial, multiethnic, multisexual, multieverything” (Essence, 1992: 102). Thus Tashi’s motley crew of supporters include Adam, her husband, Olivia, her friend and Adam’s sister; Lisette, her husband’s lover; Pierre their illegitimate son; Benny, Tashi and Adam’s retarded son; the Jungian “Old Man,” Lisette’s uncle; Raye, her African-American psychiatrist and Mbatu an African woman she befriends. This multiplicity of difference is celebrated throughout the text as a way of bridging many social divides. Again this ideal race family is juxtaposed with the debilitating African family forms.

In fact, in *Possessing*, Africans have no discernible family structure. They are strangely individualistic in their interactions. All African families are abusive and oppressive. There is the sadistic Torabe who drives his wife to suicide with his cruelty; Tashi’s mother who shares a husband with five other wives we never see or hear of; and we never know whether Tashi has any other siblings besides her sister Dura who dies from female circumcision. Then there’s M’lissa whose mother performed the circumcision procedure that crippled her – the list is endless. Africans only act in solidarity when they uphold one harmful tradition after another: for example, Torabe’s wife’s family when they keep sending her back to Torabe to cut her open, or when the villagers throw Torabe out of the village because he could not keep his wife (*Possessing*: 130).

Womanism and Black feminist criticism

My reading of Walker’s womanist politics in *The Color Purple* implies that Walker’s womanism applies seamlessly to the condition of African-American women in America or that African-American women can adopt it unproblematically. However this is not the

case as the womanist theory has posed many problems for African-American feminist thinkers and other black feminists in Africa and the Diaspora. Among some of its criticisms is the suggestion that it is reactionary and promulgates an essentialised view of black womanhood. Furthermore, bell hooks points out Walker's failure in *The Color Purple* to problematise lesbianism, thus robbing it of its radical nature (1990: 456). The point here though is Walker's use of her womanist ethic to construct positive identities for African American women at the expense of African women. Her campaign against female circumcision has shifted attention away from the simplified black/white binary construction in feminist thought and refocused it on the discordant relations between those categorised as other. Therefore while womanism and its applicability to African American women may warrant closer inspection, the focus of this chapter has been on the problems it poses for African women.

Chapter Three

Creating Global Identities: Making Cultural Sense Of The Body In *Warrior*

Marks

The way the African woman's body has been represented in Western discourse has been severally criticised by both mainstream and black/Third-world feminists. Critics from different ideological backgrounds and different disciplines have decried the objectification and exoticisation of the black woman's body, particularly in colonialist and first-wave feminist discourse. African critics like Oyeronke Oyewumi, Ama Ata Aidoo and Ifi Amadiume, to mention a few, have pointed out that mainstream feminists rely on colonial discourse for their portrayal of African women. And that it is this discourse that allows them to transpose their (Western) concept of gender onto other (non-Western) contexts. The issue of female circumcision however seems to have undermined such criticisms or made them secondary to the all-important issue of so-called bodily integrity. Most Western opponents of female circumcision, notably Mary Daly, Fran P. Hosken, Hanny Lightfoot-Klein and Alice Walker, express the view that the procedure results in such severe bodily harm to women that it should be eradicated by all means, even if this means – as has often been the case – marginalizing and silencing the women who practise it. The renewed interest in female circumcision has made the exoticisation of the African women's body at least palatable if not acceptable. This is perhaps due to the fact that, as Alice Walker's campaign against the practice shows, exoticising the African woman's body is no longer exclusively done by Western (read white) feminists, as was usually charged.

In this chapter I look at the way the body is constructed and read in Walker and Parmar's texts on the subject of female circumcision, *Warrior Marks* – the film and the text. I analyse the symbols they rely on to shorthand the body and inscribe black female identity and argue that they derive these from an imperialist discourse that has always used the African woman's body to make a case for colonisation. In *Warrior Marks: Female Genital Mutilation and the Sexual Blinding of Women*, the documentary film on which Walker collaborated with Pratibha Parmar and its accompanying coffee-table book of the same name, the authors/producers enter the discourse on female circumcision through a problematic process of identification that mystifies and erases the African woman's body even as it attempts to inscribe it. It is easy to discern from their work the same ethnocentric impulse behind non-fictional travel writings: to make history and to form objects, while retaining the prerogative to construct others just like them.

In *Warrior Marks*, the text, Walker and Parmar are aware of the racist and imperialist representations of Africans, particularly African women in anthropology, colonial literature and Western popular culture in general, and they want to break away from such representations. They try to do this by including themselves in their representations. In an attempt to avoid "othering" African women they use their own experiences as points of connection with the women they seek to represent. But because they ignore the specificity of their particular experiences as black women in North America and Britain respectively, they universalise these experiences as experiences of black women everywhere. Secondly, their acts of identification often prove to be merely gestural as they place themselves outside the experiences of those they seek to represent.

Thirdly this identification obliterates the subjects of their discourse: it becomes difficult to see Africans through the self-representations of the authors/producers.

Warrior Marks, the text, is a written record of the film of the same name, and while there are tensions between the two to make it possible for them to be read separately – a lot that is alleged in the text is lost in the film – there is enough ideological contiguity between them to justify reading them as one. *Warrior Marks*, like most documentaries and ethnographic texts, relies on many other texts, voices and discourses for verification, validation and even authority but has the final word on the subject. Among the discourses that inform Walker and Parmar's text is nineteenth-century non-fictional travel about Africa. This form of travel writing parallels anthropology in its desire to record "other" cultures (for posterity), to differentiate details for better control and most importantly to recognise the familiar in the foreign and vice versa. It is inevitable that their text has to come in these two forms, a text and a film, because in the late twentieth century world of advanced technology film brings travel home better than the text. Furthermore as Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan point out, in ethnographic film, "Western subjects learn to 'see' in a specific set of historically constructed interpretive regimes based upon discourses of unmediated visuality, scientific evidence, objectivity and the 'real'" (1996: 8).

Personal journeys and ego trips: encountering un/familiar "others" in *Warrior Marks* the text

Warrior Marks the text is divided into three parts. The first part opens with an introduction by Walker, followed by a section entitled, "Alice's Journey." The second part narrated by Parmar is entitled "Pratibha's Journey" and finally the last part is entitled

“Interviews.” Walker and Parmar’s parts of the book comprise letters, diary or journal entries and in Walker’s part, a potential script for the film *Warrior Marks*. The interview section contains interviews conducted by Walker and Parmar in America, England and Africa with activists against female circumcision, circumcisers, and circumcised women as well as excerpts and quotations from other texts on female circumcision and Africa. All these parts are interspersed with photographs of the people that Walker and Parmar meet on their journeys. Structured this way, the text guides the reader through the beginnings of the authors’ interest in the subject of female circumcision, what motivated them to act against this practice, their vision for the documentary film they are making, the problems they encounter in the making of the film, and finally to the voices of the women they are representing

The titles “Alice’s Journey” and “Pratibha’s Journey” set the tone of personal odysseys and personal exposures. The correspondence between these two women forms part of the narrative strategy. From the first letter Walker writes to Parmar, beginning “Dear Pratibha” (7) the authors make no effort to disguise the sentimentalism of their text. For them the political is deeply personal and then personal again: they expose themselves in order to expose the subjects of their discourse. The use of personal experiences as points of entry and ultimately, identification, underscores the fact that these are personal journeys. This would seem to mark a clear departure from the travel writing genre because, as Mary Louise Pratt points out, in travel writing the ultimate goal is to be objective, therefore distant “to the extent that [travel writing] strives to efface itself” so that “the informational orders seem natural” (1986: 144). Thus this form of writing “textually produces the Other without an explicit anchoring either in an observing

self or in a particular encounter in which the contact takes place” (140). However, personal experiences have always informed travel writing narratives; the journey is always within as well as without. In travel writing, initiating dialogue – however limited that dialogue might be – is a form of self-recognition. According to Hammond and Jablow, the traveller journeys into Africa “in quest of renewed contact with the source of his own being” (1977: 143). Thus in their journeys into Africa, Walker and Parmar inevitably find themselves. To put it another way, the authors “situate themselves in the portrait of the other” in order to radicalise their travel discourse.

Walker uses a childhood incident to identify with circumcised African women. When she was eight, one of her brothers wounded her in the eye with a BB gun, an incident she feels can be equated with female circumcision because both are forms of patriarchal wounding. Walker concludes from this incident that she is “marked forever, like the woman who has been robbed of her clitoris” and that hers is a “visual mutilation that helped [her] “see” the subject of genital mutilation” (1993: 18). For her, publicly indicting her family for this incident is part of that process of identification, a way to solidify her claim of kinship with the African women she represents, because, if she can castigate her blood relations, then she is justified in doing the same to Africans. In *Warrior Marks*, she condemns African women, particularly as mothers, for betraying their daughters and colluding with patriarchy just as she condemns her own mother for her injury. It is through this injury that she hopes to form solidarity with the African women whose plight she documents, to be “a part of the subject and not just an observer ... in a deliberate effort to stand with the mutilated women, not beyond them” (13).

But even as she stands with the African women she distances herself from them as someone who has moved past her own mutilation. She places herself above them because unlike them she has managed to “flourish [and] grow despite her “mutilation” (19).

Through this problematic process of identification Walker constructs African women as victims, while casting herself as their saviour. She differentiates at the moment when she’s claiming similarity. In fact, in their portrayal of Africans Walker and Parmar use what Mary Louise Pratt calls “manners-and-customs description” (1986: 140). Pratt explains that the aim of such description is to normalise the other and portray him/her as knowable. As she puts it,

The portrait of manners and customs is a normalising discourse, whose work is to codify difference, to fix the Other in a timeless present where all “his” actions and reactions are repetitions of “his” normal habits. (139)

According to Pratt, in this kind of writing, the “traits” of the Other are catalogued, “enumerated” as the sum total of the Other’s identity (139). Thus Walker can speak of the texture and skin colour of Africans as something fixed and homogeneous – there is no historical or geographical context (1993: 14).

It is her positioning above these women that allows her to see them better than they see themselves. It is not coincidental that Walker’s narrative centres so much on seeing – she can now “see the subject of female genital mutilation” (18) while the “mutilated” women suffer from impaired “sexual vision” (9) and can therefore never be sexually “seen” (9) – seeing is a big part of travel writing. Thus she uses her wounded eye not only to identify with these women, but also metonymically, for the powerful vision that enables her to see African women even though she claims that they cannot be seen. In travel writing it is this all-seeing eye that informs “the manners and customs

descriptions.” And it is inevitable that when this “eye ... scans the Other’s body” (Pratt, 1986: 139) it focuses on the genitalia. Due to its penetrating power the eye sees what cannot be seen (private parts) and opens them up; “the eye ‘commands’ what falls within its gaze.” Thus as Pratt explains, the portraits of the other focus on the body as “seen/scene... commonly with the genitals as the crucial site/sight in the ‘bodyscape” (139).

In *Warrior Marks* the text, the scene is literally conflated with the body, genitalia is (supposedly) demystified, and exposed so that it is both seen and scene. Landscape is reduced to bodyscape, or vice versa so that female circumcision is portrayed as blight to both. From the moment Walker arrives in Gambia, for instance, mutilation is all she sees. Describing their arrival, she writes:

We drove through the sprawling village of Serekunda. Very basic, jammed with pedestrians and cars. The area is heavily Muslim. The women, most of them, mutilated as children. (38)

And, as in travel writing where the eye – though powerful enough to command the landscape – is “powerless to act or interact” (Pratt, 1986: 143) with the object of its gaze, Walker’s omniscient eye empowers her to act, but not to interact with the objects of her gaze. It is as if the women in these countries display their mutilated genitalia for all to see, as Walker continues;

This exposure to so much mutilation has caused a mutilation tape to play at odd times in my head – and I see and almost feel the razor descending and slicing away not only labia lips but facial lips and eyes and noses, as well. (38)

Thus though powerful, her eye is also vulnerable, imprisoned within because now she is no longer looking but “exposed” to frightening visions of mutilation.

The examples of this kind of bodyscape/landscape conflation proliferate as Walker and Parmar travel through two African countries, Senegal and Gambia, observing a landscape that is both harmed and harmful. In her section of the book, Parmar sees baobab trees and remarks “the baobab trees are unique to Senegal and myths about them abound. I wanted to film them because they looked mutilated; somehow they seemed to me to be symbols of the women’s mutilation” (211 –12). Again like Walker, mutilation is all she sees, and she does not feel compelled to explain the connection between the baobab trees and the “mutilation” of women. This is where Walker and Parmar’s travel writing joins imperialist discourse: Parmar does not see the need to explain the connections and the claims she makes because these are to her the already “known” things. Hammond and Jablow point out that past explorer writers of Africa would “seize upon aspects of religion and art and detach them from their cultural matrix and their actual significance” and make them “represent the totality of African life” (1977: 139). The result is that, for Walker and Parmar everything must be seen through female circumcision: the behaviour of the Africans, culture, nature and economy have a causal link to female circumcision.

Furthermore, Hammond and Jablow continue, there is also a “tendency to seize upon any item, no matter how innocuous, and convert it into something bloodcurdling” (138). For Parmar it is the baobab trees, the “frantic dancing” which according to her has a more sinister meaning in this context because it “reinforce[s] patriarchal power” (179). Walker on the other hand attaches “blood curdling” connotations to so many things: if it is not the slaughter of the chicken – which to her is a veiled threat of decapitation to the newly circumcised girls (49) – it is the way women dress or eat sweets (43, 48).

Thus despite their claims of identifying with African women, Walker and Parmar stand beyond them. If anything, these acts of identification result in misrepresentation: because, as Kaplan and Grewal point out, while horrible Walker's injury for instance, has its own history and location.

Walker's experience of violence can be read through the lens of male dominance that is complexly sanctioned within a nuclear and extended family both shaped and constrained by histories of racism and class among other social forces at work in the American South. (1996: 12)

While the two situations may appear similar they contain multiple cultural meanings that go beyond race and gender and deserve to be deciphered in their context for a deeper understanding. Kaplan and Grewal continue:

[Walker's] identification with the "victims" of female genital surgeries does not inform us about the nuanced relations between men and women, between women of different classes, ages, nations, ethnicities, and their differential participation in modernity in contemporary Africa. Like so many acts of identification, it enacts its own epistemic violence and erasures. (12)

When Walker equates female circumcision, a coming-of-age rite, to a personal childhood incident, she robs the former of its cultural meaning.

Walker and Parmar's journeys are typical of odysseys: the travellers enter unfamiliar territory – neither had ever been to the Gambia and Senegal before – experience it and articulate its problems for audiences elsewhere. Again Pratt explains that travel writing was written for people "back home" therefore Walker and Parmar's adventures culminate into missives not only to each other but to audiences back home, inviting others who share what Pratt would call "planetary consciousness" (1992: 1 – 11) to join them in saving African women and children. Walker's driving mission is to save at least "one little baby girl" from the pain of "genital mutilation" (25). Parmar also wants

to make “a film that would contribute to change, however limited” (136). While modestly framing their ambitions, it is clear that the authors see their efforts heroically, they see themselves breaking taboos and exposing hidden horrors in Africa. Both are on personal crusades to expose female circumcision for what it is – “mutilation” – and to make the women who practice it aware of its dangers. Unlike travel narratives, where Pratt discerns an eye that is “unheroic, unparticularized, without ego, interest, or desire of its own” (1986: 143), in Walker and Parmar’s narrative the eye absorbs and eventually swallows everything it surveys until it becomes the sole subject of its own discourse: their text and film are about this omniscient “eye.” This is why Micere Githae Mugo suggests that Walker and Parmar are not just on “self-acclaimed metaphorical journeys, but, [they are] literally on long ego trips” (1997: 478).

The Other’s other: Re-colonising African women’s bodies in *Warrior Marks*

Although Walker and Parmar make some attempt to include the voices of the women they seek to represent, they have the first and the last word on the subject. They are the ones who define the terms of this inclusion. They draw a clear distinction between themselves as outsiders and the Africans they encounter both in Africa and elsewhere as insiders. This becomes problematic when there is no balance between the voices of the outsiders and insiders, when the authors privilege their point of view above that of the insiders. Such dichotomy casts insiders, as so-called native informants, as producers of raw information, which is formulated into knowledge by outsiders, who by virtue of their location in the West are experts.

Although they interview “experts” like Awa Thiam and Dr. Kouyatte for their texts, these experts are merely there to validate their point of view and to lend

authenticity to their project. Their expertise is compartmentalised, they are experts in parts but not in the whole. They comment on their allocated parts, and offer bits and parts of information. For instance Awa Thiam's work is appropriated. Parmar uses an excerpt from her book, *Black Sisters Speak Out*, P.K's story, as a dramatic centre of her film, without attributing it (in the film) at least. The use of the book in this way shows her positioning in this work; this is not a dialogue. Her work is not discussed in detail or read, but incorporated and appropriated outside its context. The circumcisers, the circumcised girls and the other informants in the book are also not necessarily expected to know the whole picture, the true picture of how things are; theirs' is false consciousness, they provide information which the filmmakers then translate into knowledge. Describing the non-white filmmaker's situation Trinh T Minh-ha might as well be describing the role of the native informant to the foreign filmmaker when she says,

What the outsider expects from the insider, is, in fact, a projection of an all-knowing subject that this outsider usually attributes to himself and to his own kind. In this unacknowledged self/other relation, however, the other would always remain the shadow of the self. Hence not really, not quite all-knowing. (1990: 374)

In the text, Parmar details her pursuit of Awa Thiam who, according to her, is vital to their project as she is one of the most important feminist voices in Africa. She explains that

One of [her] guiding principles in thinking about this film [was] that it had to foreground African women's voices: *voices of anger, analysis, resistance and self-determination*. (109, emphasis added)

It is apparent here that Parmar and Walker alone possess the privilege to include or exclude those voices they consider relevant or irrelevant. They alone decide how those voices should sound. The voices of women who do not share their anger about female

circumcision are marginalized or distorted. Parmar relates the story of their interview with Madame Fall who in their previous conversations had said what they wanted to hear: “had spoken of the joys of sex, how important it was to her, how circumcision took this pleasure from women” (206). But on the filmmaker’s return with the camera Madame Fall is circumspect; “none of this occurred in our film interview, and none of our promptings *produced what we were looking for*. Instead she talked about her ‘leader’ and the political party she belonged to” (207). Thus, this interview is not included in the film. It is conceivable perhaps that Madame Fall does not share the filmmaker’s prioritisation of female circumcision, that even though she considers it as a subject worth discussing she does not consider it important enough to discuss on camera.

This makes clear the tension between what the filmmakers want to hear and what the women want to talk about. Such moments of dissonance are too many to enumerate here. But they are incidents that highlight the authors’ power to decide what is and what is not important. They do not ask what is going on; instead they project, theorise and regurgitate tired clichés about Africa and Africans. They surmise, and assume in sarcastic asides, that they know what the reality is. In Walker’s section, the only questions she asks are rhetorical:

What happened to these people that they seem so joyless and oppressed? Is it Islam as some suggest which encourages passivity and desertification? Everything, including massive overgrazing of livestock, turning the fertile land to desert, is merely ‘the will of Allah’? I think genital mutilation plays a role. (68)

All of these questions are sociological questions that demand serious research on Walker's part; instead she asks them rhetorically because she believes she already has the answers. She continues:

The early submission by force that is the hallmark of mutilation. The feeling of being overpowered and thoroughly dominated by those you are duty bound to respect. The result is women with downcast eyes and stiff backs and necks (they are of course beaten by fathers and brothers and husbands). (69)

The parenthetic aside is unsubstantiated and the implication is that it does not need to be; it is the kind of “goes-without-saying” statement so favoured by colonial discourse: they are always this, have been like this throughout the ages. As Uma Nayaran argues in *Dislocating Cultures*, in colonial writing, Third World countries are often represented as places without history:

The only function of the Present in such representations of the Third World contexts is to testify to the stubborn persistence of the Past in the guises of ‘unchanging traditions.’ (1997: 48)

The most muzzled and vilified women, though, are the circumcisers. Walker describes an interview that she considers pivotal to her quest to uncover and demystify the practice of female circumcision in Africa, she describes it as “the interview [she] had come to Africa to get. Why have women become the instruments of torturing their daughters? What would such a woman have to say for herself?” (301). The interview however is technically and structurally suspect, and as the following excerpt from the interview shows, the circumciser might as well not be present.

- Q: Could you tell us what is removed from the children, what part of the body is removed from the children?
- A: She says that also she will not reveal because it’s a – it’s a secret, and it’s a secret society. It’s not to be revealed to anybody
- Q: Well we know that when children are circumcised the clitoris is removed, the inner labia, the outer labia.... This is not a secret – everyone knows this already. What we don’t know is why it continues to be done, because it is a very painful thing and sometimes presents great health problems to the children. (303 –4)

The final question is more revealing of the irrelevance of the circumciser’s views to Walker’s discourse as she asks, not to her directly but to the translator perhaps or who

knows whom, “Is she a happy woman? Is she a happy person?”(307). This third-person question undermines any illusion that this is a “conversation.” Walker has already made up her mind about what circumcision is, how it feels and why it is done. The trip to Africa is merely an exercise to lend credibility to her preconceived theories.

Walker literally puts words in the circumciser’s mouth because “through [her] superior ethical positioning (her ‘knowledge’ of right and wrong) ... she ‘knows better’” (Grewal and Kaplan, 1996: 22). Parmar and Walker’s text is about what they know about themselves and these women; their narratives are informed by “objective/scientific” knowledge of female anatomy. Thus the similarity they claim with the Other is predicated on this objective knowledge; this encounter is characterised by their focus on themselves, their bodies. The result is that we see the African women, particularly their bodies, through the bodies of the authors.

From the moment they arrive in Africa, they begin to recount, in graphic detail, the toll the landscape, food and in fact everything about the country they arrive in, takes on their bodies. For instance Walker writes above of the waking nightmares that plague her when she is exposed to “so much mutilation” (38). From then on she complains of pre-menopausal insomnia, dry skin, enervation etc. Parmar’s arrival in Africa, is also marked by a nightmare of a “black” African sky, and she wonders whether it is an “anxiety dream or an omen” (138). Her body takes on so much pain from Africa that when she gets home, “her back just gives out” (224). Perhaps the most graphic of the two, Parmar regales the reader with details of bodily functions such as menstrual cramps, fatigue, and even diarrhoea.

It is with these seemingly trivial, anecdotal digressions that Walker and Parmar hope to woo their readers to their point of view. They are effectively writing about African women's bodies, from their own bodies, so that the reader can see the severe harm that a procedure like female circumcision can cause on something as delicate as the female body. Parmar and Walker use their bodies as neutral objects that can take on multicultural discourses. However as Moira Gatens warns in her essay "Power, Bodies and Difference," the human body is always a signified body and as such cannot be understood as a 'neutral object' upon which science can construct 'true' discourse" (1992: 89). Parmar and Walker's insistence that the female body is constructed and read in one way leads them to denounce the African woman's body as disabled, to the point of proclaiming it unnatural. They rely on the idea of a natural or essential, sexed body that exists independently of social relations. Drawing on Foucault, Judith Butler makes the point that

The body is not 'sexed' in any significant sense prior to its determination within a discourse through which it becomes invested with an 'idea' of natural or essential sex. The body gains meaning within discourse only in the context of power relations. (1990: 92)

By foregrounding their own bodies as natural, intact and therefore ideal, they fail to recognise the role of social discourse in the construction of the body. According to Gatens, even anatomy itself is not universal:

There is regress involved in positing the anatomical body as the touchstone for cultural bodies since it is a particular culture which chooses to represent bodies anatomically. Another culture might take the clan totem as the essence of truth of particular bodies. (1992: 89)

Because Parmar and Walker insist on the universalised concepts of the body, pain, sexuality and other social relations, they do not see the need to investigate how such

concepts are understood in other cultural contexts. This is what leads them to believe that African women are ignorant of their own bodies and therefore ignorant of the effects of this procedure. Part of the aim of the *Warrior Marks* project is to educate African women about their bodies, how they should be.

Just as they use their bodies in *Warrior Marks*, the text, to achieve this end, in the film Parmar uses a dancer to achieve this visually. In fact, Parmar makes no attempt to hide the fact that she is making an emotionally charged film, a film that will appeal viscerally rather than intellectually. She writes, "I wanted to approach the editing of this film organically and intuitively, working with the images as much as with the spoken words" (220). Caught between showing graphic images of circumcision which she believes would "paralyse the viewers with horror," and maintaining a respectful distance that would "retain the integrity of the story" (221), she opts for using a dancer for "symbolic resonance" (222). She borrows P. K's story from Awa Thiam's book, *Black Sisters Speak Out* and uses it as a kind of dramatisation of the horror of female circumcision. A voiceover narrates P. K's narrative in the film while the dancer gyrates and writhes on the floor simulating the terror and pain of excision. The dancer is crucial in winning viewers over to Parmar's point of view. Her body is the lens through which the bodies of African women can be seen. From the opening scenes, African women's bodies are literally framed by the dancer's body. The women file onto the screen looming behind the dancer while she dances in the forefront. Her body, dressed in what appears to be, for a lack of a better word, an "ethnic garb" is constructed as inherently intact, fit and ideal. In contrast, the women who file onto the screen behind her are not made to appear assertive or fit and they are less individualised. The dancer is scantily clad, while the

women behind her are covered in headscarves and long skirts. She nimbly hops about, all the while looking directly at the camera. The women behind her, on the other hand, shuffle in, with downcast eyes, save for furtive glances at the camera, in a single file behind a circumciser dressed in white, who gives a sidelong glare at the camera.

The dancer is a visual translation of the aforementioned identification process, and true to form, she partially blocks the circumcised women from view – the viewer has to literally look through her to see these women. Her body is the real body that is only taking on this pain temporarily for the stage while forcing the viewer to imagine what it must be like for “real.” She may look like these women but she is not one of them.



Fig 1. Richelle, the dancer used in the film as the lens through which the film’s construction of the body can be read.

To drive these differences home there are inter-cutting shots of “African” scenes with Walker’s front steps adorned with “ethnic” ornaments. With this juxtaposition the film differentiates between Africa and African consciousness. Walker’s house with its African masks, antiques and trinkets, like Walker’s “African print” headscarf and the dancer’s ethnic costume, all denote African consciousness. The African footage is accompanied by drumming, which of course “signals ‘Africa’ to non-Africans in both Hollywood and standard ethnographic films” (Grewal And Kaplan, 1996: 17) and real

Africa is where the danger lies. Walker and her party, though possessing African consciousness are strangers here, and they are at pains to show that. The repeated sequences of Walker walking about, caressing termite hills, attired in pants which she believes separates her and her party from African women (85) are part of showing foreignness.

The use of the bodies, familiar and unfamiliar, does not seem enough to highlight these differences. Thus despite Parmar's reservations about horrifying their viewers this is what the authors attempt to do in both the film and the text. In the book, the authors persistently use the words terror and horror even when these words seem inappropriate. For instance, interviewing a mother of a child that has just been circumcised, Walker writes that when she looked into her eyes she "encountered the blankness of terror" (42). She experiences chills when she sees the circumciser's pendant (48) because it horrifies her to think that this is the only connection this woman has with Egypt. Parmar also throws away words like harrowing, horror and terror with ease.

However it is in the film version that Parmar goes out of her way to communicate the horrors of Africa to her viewers. She relies on horror film genre conventions to depict the "horrors" of female genital mutilation even when this undermines the "truth" of her documentary. For instance the film has a repeated shot of an open doorway to an abandoned "dark" house; while the camera moves closer to the doorway to a very dark interior, the music that is conventionally used in horror films swells on the soundtrack (fig. 1). In the text Parmar explains that she shot a circumciser's mother walking into the hut, and they shot the house "from a point of a child walking into the hut." This is not just a hut; Parmar thinks of it as "the house of torture" (202). Of course no horror film is

complete without the unaware victim, who blithely goes about her (it is often her) business, while the audience knowing the horror that she is about to encounter squirm in trepidation or scream their lungs out for her to beware, “look behind you!” In Parmar’s version all we see at first are the legs of the little girl, the prototypical victim of “female genital mutilation”, walking on a tiled floor, towards (we expect) the circumciser, while a voice-over narrative describes the tools that the circumciser uses. Having built up the horror we see the girl’s face and then we see that she is walking towards a window. The circumcisers are naturally the villains of this horror narrative. There is one in particular who is shown wielding a large knife. This old woman is not interviewed in the film, in fact never says a word, but she is a menacing presence in the film.

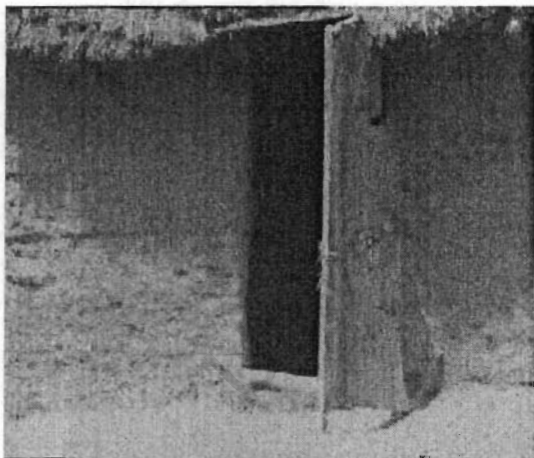


Fig. 2 some of the horror visuals that the film uses

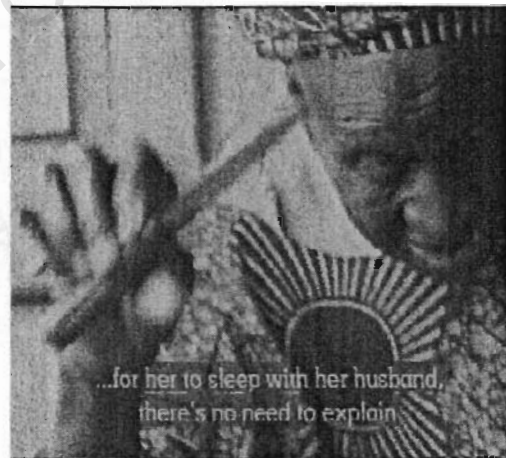


Fig 3 Circumcisers are a menacing presence in the film

We simply see her brandishing a knife while a voice-over narrates something else (fig.2). When the voice-over is narrating P. K’s story she looms large behind the dancer who “acts” out P.K’s anguish and terror.

Competing Discourses: The female circumcision industry

Because it became such a “hot” sensational issue in the West, female circumcision seems to have spawned an industry of its own, particularly in the media. It is not surprising therefore that Parmar and Walker see themselves as the vanguard who goes through extreme difficulty to expose a practice that is both taboo and clandestine. This, despite the fact that female circumcision is openly celebrated in the countries that they visit, and that African feminists and others have been writing about the practice for decades. The exposé nature of their work curtails some of their ambitions because, first of all exposés have to be shocking, and groundbreaking, and exclusive; they have to beat others in terms of time and content. Thus they proceed to shroud the practice in mystery and insist that it is a taboo subject even though the women they meet often willingly and openly discuss it with them. Often Walker and Parmar exaggerate the problems they encounter or create problems where there are none. For instance Parmar is surprised to learn that her discussions with the women in Senegal will not have to be held clandestinely (148) but she creates problems for herself and her crew by not completing the necessary paperwork to film in Senegal because it would take too much time to do so. Most of their logistical problems result from hastily made arrangements, budget constraints and haphazard planning, but they recount these problems as dangers that surround the practice and lurk everywhere in Africa.

Again, because of the competitive nature of exposés they have an added task of discrediting other exposés on the same subject. For instance Parmar is peeved to find out that another U. S film crew has been to The Gambia to document female circumcision.

She lambastes this crew for making this subject a “media commodity” and claims the high moral ground:

I was not interested in colluding in the torture and mutilation of girls for the sake of “good” footage... There are many ways to show the horror of excision, ...What some film crews would do to get “footage,” and how distant and detached they must be from their subject matter is incomprehensible to me. (162 –3)

And of course no exposé would be complete without a scoop. For Parmar this comes in the form of an interview with Tracy Chapman. Although Chapman has nothing relevant to say about the subject, Parmar is overjoyed because “she is known to be camera shy and a private person” (216).

For her part, Walker maintains these exposé aspirations of their text by not acknowledging the circumcisers’ willingness to be interviewed for the camera. She insists that they are hiding something and that it is her duty to uncover what they are hiding. Central to Walker’s belief that circumcision is taboo, and that she plays a crucial role in shedding light on the subject is her revisionist perspective in her fictions and other writings on the subject. That is, she “discovers” female genital mutilation after she has already written about it, and revises her opinion about it. Thus her texts on female circumcision inspire a rereading of her corpus in light of her “new” discovery. This is even clearer in her book, *The Same River Twice* (1996) an autobiographical chronicle of the making of the film of her novel *The Color Purple*, where she attempts to reread other texts through the lens of her “newly” acquired knowledge about female circumcision. In the book, Walker describes, in a footnote, a scene in the film version of Isak Dinesen’s *Out of Africa* where a Somali woman watches the funeral of her erstwhile lover, an English trader named Barkley-Cole. She writes about this scene:

We *now* know that the Somali woman represented as being Barkley-Cole's mistress would undoubtedly have been genitally inaccessible to him, because of infibulation. That she was "safely" closed to penetration was probably the only reason she was permitted, by her male relatives, to be Barkley-Cole's servant. (1996: 286, emphasis added)

Such anachronism is unsettling for the reader, because we have to ask, who is the "we" in this statement, who only "now" know that this woman was genitally infibulated? And how does s/he know? Neither Isak Dinesen/Karen Blixen's book, nor the film based upon it makes any mention of this fact. Thus, one has to assume that once Walker disseminates this "knowledge" about African women, it will become well known.

Ironically, the authors heap scorn on Dinesen's *Out Of Africa*, particularly the film adaptation of the book. In *Warrior Marks*, the text, Parmar suggests that this film disseminates images of Africans that sustain their despicable treatment by whites (200). In *The Same River Twice* – perhaps miffed because *Out of Africa* pipped Steven Spielberg's film adaptation of her novel *The Color Purple* at the Academy Awards – Walker describes the film as "reactionary and racist" (1996: 286). But in their text they draw from many reactionary and racist sources like Hanny LightFoot-Klein and Fran Hosken without any attempt to contextualise these sources. For instance Lightfoot-Klein's work is based on her travels in Sudan and East Africa, yet they apply her work in Senegal and The Gambia. And Parmar, while watching her footage from Africa recalls "a ritual song of female circumcision" found in a book published in Paris in 1937 without explaining how that song is relevant to this context. Judging from their sources alone it is inevitable that in their film, and text, they reproduce the self-same racist images. It seems without these images, Africa would be unrecognisable. Their reliance on stereotypical images of Africans makes their objections to these self-same images in other texts absurd

if not disingenuous. Parmar, for instance, expresses her frustration when she is unable to purchase a postcard in Senegal because she finds that the postcards on sale do not depict African reality (as if any postcard ever depicts reality). She writes;

All I could find were the usual ethnographic stereotypical images of bare-breasted African women staring into the photographer's lens, images of sexual availability for the white male tourists.... Who stops to think of the reality behind these images? (199)

With her film, Parmar hopes to use the right images, images that address the reality of these women's lives. She wants to make a film that will portray a "mosaic of [African] women's lives" (197).



Fig. 4

Some of the stereotypical images of African women that Walker and Parmar use in their representation



Fig. 5

But her idea of the reality of African women's lives, based on less than a month's observation, comprises "women pounding millet in large bowls, babies strapped to their backs" (197). These are the images that Hammond and Jablow argued are also the standard of colonial fictions on Africa. They explain that, in British fiction on Africa, African women were either portrayed as over-sexed or overworked, but either way they were always reduced to their physical organs (1977: 150 – 2).

Conclusion

While there is no doubt that there is a need for alliances between African women, African-American women, Third World women, women of colour and others, it is becoming clear that such alliances are premised on simplistic notions of gender and race. In her essay, "Alice in Motherland: Reading Alice Walker on Africa and Screening the Color 'Black'" Oyeronke Oyewumi (2003) argues that terms like "Third World women" and "women of colour" homogenise those women categorised as "other" in a simple opposition to white women and ignore the differences between those lumped under these terms. As such alliances formed under such terms sacrifice the specific histories of the women defined as other, as well as their culture, for race and gender. Gender and race, Oyewumi explains, are not sufficient for understanding the nuances of social oppression. Thus she warns:

Feminist purveyors of global sisterhood – a sisterhood based on common genitalia – would do well to note that even apparently similar body parts have different histories and locations. (2003: 163)

If these histories and locations are not adequately investigated, what results are representations that rely on superficial similarities. Walker relies on these superficial similarities for her representations of African women. She does not adequately investigate the issue of female circumcision because she believes that she intuitively knows everything about the practice as a woman and as an African American.

However as I have tried to show, such intuitive knowledge is not enough to bridge the cultural gap between Africa and America. This is why so many African scholars took Walker to task for her representation of African women. Much of the criticism against her has focused on her neo/colonialist attitude towards Africans. While I agree with these

assessments I also feel that her work makes sense within the African-American tradition of writing about Africa. It is clear that she sees Africans strictly from her identity as an African American woman, and from her location within American culture and society, and wants to represent/construct them in her image. While informed by colonialist and imperialist discourses, Walker's stance is Africanist, in the sense that she casts herself as an expert on Africa, despite her limited knowledge about the continent and its peoples. Secondly her Africanist stance, although tied to notions of superiority based on skin colour, shows that the unequal relations between First and Third World subjects are not based on skin colour alone but are tied to capitalist definitions and distributions of power.

Perhaps Walker's standpoint heralds that second epoch of colonialism that Wole Soyinka referred to when he wrote:

We black Africans have been blandly invited to submit ourselves to a second epoch of colonisation – this time by a universal humanoid abstraction defined and conducted by individuals whose theories and prescriptions are derived from the apprehension of their world and their history, their social neuroses and their value systems. (1976: x)

Walker's universal woman in *Possessing* and *Purple* turns out not to be universal at all, she comes out of a specific context: a particular history and culture. This universal or perhaps global womanist woman is produced by the same discourses that produced the virtuous Victorian womanhood, that later produced the white middle class woman of second wave feminism. Like her predecessors, Walker's universal woman also claims sisterhood, but it is a sisterhood based on her apprehension of her world. It is this apprehension of her world that leads her to believe that she is the one well equipped enough to articulate the situation of African women better than they can. This woman, modelled on Walker herself, possesses the secret of black womanhood.