

## I. Alice Walker: A Black Feminist

Alice Walker's works are noted for their insightful treatment of African American culture. She is one of the most versatile and controversial writers of the African American literature. Walker, the first black woman to win both the Pulitzer Prize and the American Book Award for her most famous work *The Color Purple* (1982), was born to poor sharecropper parents in Eatonton, Georgia, educated at Selman and Sarah Lawrence College. She was active in the 1960s Civil Rights Movement in the South and participated in many demonstrations. Walker depicts reality of black people in her novels. She draws a deep reservoir of personal experiences to write realistically about many issues in her novels and poetry, racism and the health issues that emanate from global violence against women. Her focus is on black women, who grow to reside in a larger world and struggle to achieve independent identities beyond male dominion. Although her characters are strong, they are nevertheless, vulnerable. Their strength resides in their acknowledged debt to their mothers, to their sensuality, and to their friendships among women. These strengths are celebrated in Walker's work, along with the problems women encounter in their relationships with men, who regard them as less significant than themselves merely because they are women. The byproduct of this belief is, of course, violence. Hence, Walker's stories focus not much on the racial violence that occurs among strangers but the violence among friends and family members, a kind of deliberate cruelty, unexpected but always predictable. She emphasize on the black women's self definition against the evil of sexism, classism and racism. Her writing portrays the struggle of black people throughout history, and are praised for their insightful and riveting portraits of black life, in particular the tragic experiences of black women in a sexist and racist society ,suffering of black women at the hands of men and their struggle for survival.

Walker examines in her fiction the black women's search for selfhood through an analysis of the individual's relationship to the community. In Walker's novel, the black women's struggle to claim their selves, in order to change their lives and secure a rightful place within the social network of relationships they themselves constitute, usually absorbs the psychic pain involved in such a struggle and shatters the iron bars of gender which limit self empowerment. The author herself explains, "I believe in... a willing acceptance of responsibility for one's thoughts, behavior and actions, that makes it powerful. The white man's oppression of me will never excuse my oppression of you, whether you are man, woman, child... because the self I prize anyone" (345).

A theme throughout her work is the preservation of black culture, an exploration of the individual identity of black women and her women characters forge important link to maintain continuity in both personal relationship and communities. In her writing, she explores the "issue of the spiritual survival of black people, in particular black women." (150). In her essay, she writes, "I am preoccupied with the spiritual survival whole of my people ... I am committed to exploring the oppressions, the insanities, the loyalties and the triumphs of black women" (192).

Walker sees writing as a way to correct wrong that she observes in the world and has dedicated herself to delineating the unique dual oppression from which black women suffer: racism and sexism. Her women characters display strength, endurance, resistance, creativity, resourcefulness and forgiveness in confronting and overcoming oppressions in their lives. She is frank in depicting the often devastating circumstances of the "twin afflictions" of racism and sexism. She is aware that black women are under two layers of oppression that is the racial and the sexual. Walker admires the struggle of black women throughout history to maintain an essential spirituality and creativity in their lives, and their achievements serve as an inspiration to other. Thus, the main theme of her novels is

the lives of black women, their battle with the society for their equal economical, political and sexual rights in one word, she shows black women trying to get their racial equality. She emphasizes the healing power of love and the possibility of change: change personal, change in society.

Walker's present novel, *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992), is about the black women's pathetic situation of the Olinka, a tribal village of Africa. The novel discusses about the female circumcision or female genital mutilation, a tradition that is practiced mainly in African countries in order to ensure a girl's virginity or purity before marriage. And also it is about the woman's struggle with her African heritage and her right to self-determination beyond cultural constraints.

Tashi, protagonist of the novel, is a young woman who undergoes the female circumcision in the name of Olinkan Pride. She makes this despite the knowledge that her sister Dura died as a result of bleeding to death during the very same ritual of female genital mutilation. Shortly after her sister's death, Tashi's parents converted to Christianity and Tashi was spared the trauma of the operation. In order to prove her loyalty toward the culture she succumbs to her tribe, traditions. After mutilated she spends time with physical and psychological anguish even she couldn't make a sexual intercourse in proper way with her husband Adam, an African American who converted into Christianity.

Walker graphically describes the details of the mutilation, bringing to life the torture that these children endure at the hands of the circumcisers. As a result of her decision, Tashi's life is changed. The essence of her soul dies. She is gripped with pain, unable to pass urine, menstruate, or even walk normally. Her sexuality lost, she is never able to enjoy making love with her husband again. This leads Adam to have a long affair with Lisette, a French woman, who ironically, takes a strong interest in helping Tashi,

who becomes hopelessly depressed. Later, by some miracle, she becomes pregnant. She gives birth to a son whose skull is crushed during birth because of the impossibly small opening he must pass through, leaving him brain damaged. Tashi's husband meanwhile has a perfectly healthy child with his mistress, sending Tashi into an even deeper depression. Tashi continues to live this tortured existence. Adam takes her to the United States where she sees many psychiatrists but the black feminist Raye, only understand Tashi's physical and psychological pain. Tashi explains to her how their African leader mandated female genital mutilation from one generation to the next. The ritual of female circumcision almost destroyed Tashi physically and emotionally.

Tashi returns to Olinka when she reads M'Lissa's becoming a venerated symbol of Olinkan pride. The tortured Tashi plots her revenge, over a period of several weeks they talk. Tashi ritually washes her intended victim, who taunts her for foolishly submitting to circumcision. M'Lissa is prepared to become a martyr and Tashi smothers her with a pillow as she attends her. She is indicted for murder.

As Barbara Christian comments in *Black Feminist Criticism* (1985), Walker's struggle focuses on the "struggle for black people, especially black women to claim their lives" (7). Christian characterizes this struggle as a form of rebellion. Indeed, Walker's works deal with the theme of fight against the self definition and the suppression of black women in the male dominated society. The novel, *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, discusses the horrors of female genital mutilation, a tradition that is practiced mainly in African countries in order to ensure a girl's virginity or purity before marriage.

This novel has received much critical appraisals since its publication. Different critics have viewed it from different perspectives.

Alyson R. Buckman examines, *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, "as an example of revolutionary action against the oppression of those colonized by the imperialist gaze"

(27), she further points out “ the female body and the African body are exposed as sites of colonization by power elites; the ritual of female genital mutilation imaged as means to oppression” (26).

Erich Eichman criticized Walker for her depiction of African women in the novel, *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, the main charge against Walker has that of cultural imperialism. he claims that “her depiction of Africa and Africans is beholden to her western hegemonic heritage as an American rather than the African self she claims in the novel” (53). In the same line he argues that the novel represents “African women like M’Lissa, Nafa/Catherine as timid over worked slaves in the latter case or witches who are “nothing but tortures of children whereas African American women like Raye, Olivia are portrayed as strong, assertive and independent” (54). He further points out that the novel foregrounds its politics through the use of Mirellia Ricciardi’s autobiography, *The African Saga*. Walker’s novel *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, derives its title from the following lines in Ricciardi’s text, “[W]ith the added experience of my safaris behind me, I had begun to understand the code of birth, copulation and death by which the Africans lived. black people are natural, they possess the secret of joy, which is why they can survive the suffering and humiliation inflicted upon them” ( 81). Like Ricciardi and other colonialist writers, Eichman claims:

her reading of African women and their bodies evinces the same kind of ethnocentrism she decried in white feminist scholars. With her representation of the African woman’s body, she does not account for the different meaning that different cultures attach to the body. Her reading of African women’s bodies is informed by her western culture and it privileging of the body. (54)

Alice Walker is much applauded by several critics such as Barbara Christian points out “her willingness to challenge the fashionable belief of the day, to re-examine it in the light of her own experiences of dearly won principles that she has previously challenged and absorbed. There is a sense in which the “forbidden in the society is consistently approached by Walker as a possible route to truth” (82-3). She also discusses the interdependence of individual and societal change in Walker’s novels. Walker is a writer with political intent who wants her works to affect something in the world. Her aim is to foreground the dreams and failure of those people who have been marginalized and make them visible. Maria Lauret sees Walker as a womanist writer and as a cultural and political activist who continues to style herself as a visionary for a new age. She says that “Walker is a very distinct writer/activist who has reclaimed and redefined her activist identity” (258) she established that “Walker is, indeed, a guiding spirit in her reader’s lives.” (260). Walker reveals the truth about African- American life and African – American women’s life as she heard it and lived it. She writes in *Mother’s Garden*: “[O]ne thing I try to have in my life and my fiction is an awareness and openness to mystery, which to me is deeper than any politics, race, or geographical location” (252).

Likewise, Osaki Temu Lillian views *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, as a social madness. He believes that madness is a recurring theme in African women writing. He writes, “Tashi-Evelyn is an example of a character whose fragmentation prevents her from developing a self-defined subjectivity and therefore leads her to madness.”(44). Scholars like, Chadwell responded the novel, *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, very enlightening. She argues, “Sensationalism and punishment are not effective ways to systematically eradicate the practice of female circumcision and well-intentioned mothers should not be sacrificed for performing what they believe to be parental responsibilities” (129). Tashi is circumcised because she once identified herself with the people of Olinka.

When she moves to the United States, Tashi becomes a migratory subject. She is neither Olinkan nor American but something in between, something with multiple identities that do not always harmonize. Awa Thiam argues that “continuation of the circumcision ritual is at least a partial reaction or response to colonialism and the imposition of western values of African culture” (122).

Alice Walker uses black vernacular English in the novel. She believes the language we speak gives authenticity to our life. Jan Pilditch points out the style of Walker and the importance she places on language. He writes:

In terms of style Walker seems committed to creating works which attempt to fuse form and content into a seamless whole. It is, Walker says, language more than anything else that reveals and validates one's existence and if the language we speak is denied us, then the form we are permitted to assume historically will be of caricature. (138)

Geneva Cobb Moore comments on this novel on the basis of archetypal symbolism. He writes that the novel “marks a new beginning for an author/activist who appropriates Carl Jung's archetypal patterns of the ego, the shadow[...] the self in a psychological process that promises individual harmony and wholeness for those earnestly seeking self knowledge” (119).

The critics, Pifer and Slusser, find the application of Lacanian mirror stage theory in the novel. The novel contains female protagonists who experience epiphany like moments that lead to a fuller, more coherent sense of self. They view

Tashi's anti-government signs also prove her successful passage from the mirror stage into the postmirror stage. Her new ability with language signifies her successful entry into the symbolic. She is now able to voice her perceived lacks[...]. What Tashi finds herself separated from and thus

lacking is the culture that she previously held great faith in. (23)

Thus, what she discovers and expresses in her signs, however, is a country in which, as she writes on the signs, “if you lie to yourself about your own pain, you will be killed by those who will claim you enjoyed it” (106)

George Olakunle claims that the novel, *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, raises crucial questions about nationalism and the intersection of cultural identity and gender. He writes:

Is it possible to represent in fiction an “alien” cultural practice or belief system without violating the inner logic-the self understanding of the culture itself? and to what extent is it defensible to represent a cultural practice as simply cruel and misogynistic over and beyond the way the culture itself understands and rationalizes it. (360)

*Possessing the Secret of Joy* has received mixed reviews. *The New York Times Book Review* says, “Alice walker is a lavishly gifted writer”, but other reviewers criticized the way Walker blanketed her political beliefs in a work of fiction. Noel Perrin writes that “the author felt so strong about the subject, however, that she made a documentary with London based film maker Pratibha Parmar. The film *Warrior Marks: female Genital Mutilation and the Sexual Binding of Woman*, debuted in the United States in 1993” (167). At the same point, some critics argue that walker is making a conscious change to writing about issues rather than characters. She uses her characters as mere political props. As Debro Dickerson states that “the problem her is that there are no people, only political vehicles sprinkled with magic and dead men walking” (56).

Dorothy Randall-Tsurnta argues that Tashi emerges as an African “woman warrior” in the *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. The novel is much complex that exposes the practice of genital mutilation. She says the novel is also “a story of coming to grips with



one's African and one's African American cultural identity under the conditions of Eurocentric brainwashing" (86). She has in favor of banishing the ritual of genital mutilation from the society. She further puts the point, "*Possessing the Secret of Joy* dares to agitate against lawmaker and lawbreakers who have perpetrated genital mutilation of children" (87).

Kathleen Dion, in her essay "Alice Walker's Quest to Eradicate Female Genital Mutilation", argues "Walker is campaign against female genital mutilation, a campaign that included writing *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, her first step in educating the west about this global abuse of female children" (23). Similarly, Mary Daly argues, "Walker gave focus not on the characters of her book nor the process that she went through to write it, but rather, on the spirit of activism in which it was written" (67). But some critics are not so kind and clearly voice their disgust with *Possessing the Secret of Joy* and its author. They adamantly disagree with the author's portrayal of African women by stereotyping them as weak and incapable. Salem Mekuria writes:

Walker's novel, *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, has uprooted the problem of genital mutilation from its context reduced all other struggles by African women to one issue, transplanted it, kidnapped it, and placed it in the hands of some liberal feminists who are more concerned with the preservation of the clitoris over and above the humans of whom it is only part. (475)

He further criticizes the characters of Tashi, who he says is "a sexually dysfunction, Psychotic murderer and martyr, a symbol of us all, a victim without agency or positive will" (488). As not fairly representing the true African woman, her do the rest of the African characters of the novel, Mekuria concludes that

the African woman subjects are presented as a collection of helpless bundles of mutilated creatures, stereotypes who are far from being lining, dignified human beings. They are pitied and patronized instead of being cherished, nurtured, and invested with faith as human subjects potentially capable of understanding and changing the conditions that dehumanize them. (485)

Most of critics agree on the positive aspects of walker's adopted cause, some found walker's pursuit to be short sighted and biased. Diana Menya argues,

By taking circumcision out of its cultural context, walker has clearly Displayed the ethnocentric view of an outsider. One has to understand that circumcision is a deep rooted custom whose eradication is likely to meet with much resistance from those practicing it. What should be advocated is the preservation and encouragement of its positive and culturally protective aspects while doing away with female genital mutilation. (424)

*Possessing the Secret of Joy* has been hailed as a truly activist book. Walker mentioned this issue indirectly during her reading, stressing the importance of a women's ability to control her own body and claiming that the "autonomous woman" is absolutely necessary to save our planet.

The present study will concentrate on the female resistance against patriarchy. Especially the central character, Tashi, is physically and psychologically destroyed by the so called ritual of female genital mutilation of the patriarchal society. Different literary critics have viewed this novel from different perspectives but none of the critics has explored the female's resistance against the evil social rituals presented in the novel. So, this research will attempt to show the female resistance to the patriarchal values and rituals like circumcision, which have victimized many women. It will purely depend on

the textual analysis of *Possessing the Secret of Joy* on the basis of the theoretical tools formed by drawing the insights from the feminist discourses.

## II. Feminism

The term “feminism” does not have any one agreed meaning that could be formulated as a set of beliefs, and it probably never did have, It’s a broad movement embracing numerous phase of women’s emancipation aiming to understand women’s oppressions in terms of race, class, gender and sexual preferences and it efforts lies in changing it. It no longer seeks to abolish the systems, status and societies. It aims to realize the total self-actualization of the individual. It’s a voice against the inadequacy, the distortion as well as the ideologies, which the males have created.

Feminism is concerned with the marginalization of all women live with their being relegated to a secondary position. It represents one of the most important social, economic and aesthetic revolutions of modern times. Feminism began with the discovery by an individual of her self consciousness as a woman. Thus, it may be defined as,

a movement seeking the reorganization of the world upon a basis of sex-equality in all human relations : a movement which would reject every differentiation between individuals upon the ground of sex, would abolish all sex privileges and sex burden, and would strive to set up the recognition of the common humanity of woman and man as the foundation of law and custom. (Billington-Greig 50)

Feminism came into existence for the sake of women rights and human equality. It’s a political movement, which has become successful in giving due place to writing, of non-canonical women writers. It is also a political theory and practice to free all the social bondage of patriarchy. It is a commitment to eradicate the ideology of domination. It is an aggressive conscious feeling of women, who begin to reject their passivity. Feminism comes into practice as an attack against female marginalization as our society and civilization is pervasively patriarchal, that is, it is male-centered and controlled,

organized and conducted in such a way as to subordinate women to men in all cultural domains like “political, familial, legal, economic, religious and artistic” (Abrams 89). By this cultural process the masculine in our culture has come to be widely defined as active, dominating, adventurous, rational and creative whereas the feminine, by systematic opposition to such traits, has come to be identified as passive, acquiescent, timid, emotional and conventional.

Feminism conjures up various images and ideas regarding the women’s issues. In spite of diversity feminism is often represented as a single entity and some how concerned with gender equality and freedom. *The Penguin Dictionary Of Sociology* defines “feminism as a doctrine suggesting that women are systematically disadvantage in modern society and advocating equal opportunities for men and women” (Beasley 27).

The main aim of the feminist movement was to develop women’s personalities. It, therefore, studied women as people who were either oppressed or suppressed. All women writers, who struggled against patriarchy to contain their womanhood, were generally considered feminists. That’s why, unlike ancient women, today feminists are proud of their femaleness and have made femininity a vital tool to perceive their existence. In this relation, Toril Moe, a feminist, has defined it in this way: “[T]he word feminist or feminism are political labels indicating support for the aim of the new women’s movement” (45). Though the objective of feminism is to end sexism, it, became of its relation to other forms of oppression, it makes an attempt to end other form of oppression as well. Feminist theories try to explore women’s personal as well as common experiences of suffering, exploitation and oppression and their struggle for independence and liberation Feminism tries to discover all forms of violence and oppression against women of all different socio-political context, its causes and consequences and provides favourable strategies for women’s liberation.

Asking how long feminism has existed is a different question from that of asking when history defines its birth. Feminism, as a construct, has probably existed as long as there have been women, even if the word did not really enter the English language. If a broad concept of feminism includes women acting, speaking and writing on women's issues and rights, then we can see that these concerns go back as far as recorded history. Unfortunately, many talented women's contributions to history have been forgotten or ignored, but modern scholarship is redressing this imbalance. Many people consider that Mary Wollstonecraft, a British political thinker, was the first woman who raised her voice against the patriarchy and for the rights of women. In her essay, "*A Vindication of the Rights of Women*" (1742), she says that the neglected education of many fellow creatures is the grand source of the misery..." (Ruth 444). She, also says in the same essay argues that women are turned into weak and petty creatures by sheer neglect of proper education and by the morals and manners which are set up by the society. The issues for the rights of women had been raised by some of male writers as well as women writers earlier. Behind feminist criticism lies two centuries of struggle for women's right. This struggle was marked by such books as John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women* (1869) and Margaret Fuller's *Women in Nineteenth Century* (1845). These writers, in their books, present very important lines of woman's thoughts.

From the very beginning of human civilization, women were considered as inferior, incidental and inessential being whereas men as the subject, superior and absolute ones. Patriarchal society has indeed been well served by the masculinist images. In patriarchy, all the images of women have been male created. Time and again, we come across the ambivalence men's feelings towards women. For the masculinists, women and sex are almost synonymous terms. If sex evokes mixed feelings of approach and avoidance, most certainly it is likely that women evoke the same feeling. Misogyny of

distrust of women is an integral part of masculinism and patriarchy. Misogyny includes the beliefs that women are irrational, incompetent, gossipy, silly, overemotional, stupid, petty, dishonest, oversexed, and a host of other ugly things. Such stereotypes culminate in the attitude that women must be dominated, controlled, subdued as well as abused.

Ardener, one of the ardent male critics, has defined a separate culture for woman. According to him, men and women are the products of the same society but a man is called a cultural being whereas a woman a wild being. Indeed, men have got the power of decision making by social favour whereas women the home making. In the primitive age, women began to look after the household whereas men took the responsibility of bread. But later, this simple division of labour rendered women an inferior position in society. Men are always overpowered with the sense of "I am man; she is woman. I am strong; she is weak. I am tough; she is tender. I am self sufficient; she needful" (Ruth 54). Although a woman represents love, tenderness, compassion, passion, beauty and pleasure, emotional, dependent, she is weak. Hence women's place in patriarchal circle is precarious and unstable. Women have been victimized sexually. Men thought that it was their right to rule over women. They established the unanimous rule in every aspect of humanity, their supremacist ideology taught and encouraged women to believe that they were of less value; they were naturally inferior and unequal to men. Women were denied the rights as human beings. They occupied a little or no space in social, cultural, economic, legal or political sphere. They remained usurped, dominated, invisible, insignificant and worthless beings to male supremacy.

The history of western society remained highly discriminative and biased in women's career advancement through all the ages. The great thinkers and philosophers from Plato, Aristotle, and St. Augustine to Aquinas, Hobbes and Rousseau have also depicted women as inferior and immature in their intellectual potential. Plato went to the

extent of disallowing women and servants to take part in politics and philosophy. He labeled women as grade three citizens quite incompetent in any important and serious matters that needed deep contemplation. The Greek critic Aristotle declares that “ the female was female by virtue of certain lack of qualities” ( Selden 134) . This stands as a dehumanizing and demoralizing tendency of a philosopher like him. He says the rational soul is not present at all in a slave, in a female it is imperative, and in a child under developed. This statement has demonstrated that a significant philosopher blundered in reasoning owing to his prejudices toward male centrism. St. Augustine asserted that man was in the image of God and woman was a partial being.

St. Thomas Aquinas thought woman to be an imperfect man. He said that form was masculine and matter feminine; the superior godlike male intellect impressed its form upon the malleable inert female matter. Rousseau considered that women should be educated to please and complement men. This was not, of course, an accidental opposition. It contains a long history of gender discrimination since mythical and biblical ages. Most of the societies since the remote past have been built upon the patriarchal foundation that therefore have invigorated and unduly authorized men folk to define the world and society. They defined every aspect of society and culture from their perspective and depicted that in the works of art and literature.

A woman is viewed, and judged in terms of masculine value system. She is identified in relation to man. It is the men who defined her according to their needs and beneficiaries. She has no right to make decision about herself. She is trained to internalize the masculine truth as an absolute and transcendental reality and an inalienable aspect of her life. She gives up criticizing, judging, investigating for herself , and surrenders to male superiority. Men have controlled the conceptual arena and determined social values and structures of institutions. It is the male who has power of naming, defining and



exploring. He is authorized to analyze, describe and direct female. She herself perceives the world from masculine perspectives. A woman is compelled to perceive another female from prevailing masculine modality since she is forced to accept male dominated social values in which male has the privileged position. Women have always served others and have been told that the glory and fulfillment is to be found in the denial of them in that service.

Till recently, women were studied and examined as if they were some kind of semi-human creatures who could not speak for themselves. They were dissected, categorized, researched and resolved for the study by the male gender. It cannot even be imagined today. Gerda Learner has refuted the anti – feminist notion of women’s subculture. He argues, “Women live a duality as members of the general culture and as partakes of women’s culture” (75). In the society, women have to go according to the norms and conventions but they are wise and active in their own culture.

The feminists reject the centuries of male dominated cultures in which women were only valued for the work they produced, they do not accept the cultural and traditional images of women as petty, irrational, silly or even weak. Rather they affirm their capacities to be capable, strong, intelligent, successful and ethical human beings. The feminists demand political, social, economic as well as personal independence for women. They have directly and indirectly started revolting against the patriarchy. They reject the attitudes that regard the traditional masculine characteristics of aggression, power and competition as good and desirable and the feminine characteristics of compassion, tenderness, and compromise as weak and ridiculous. They also reject all those theories, which tend to separate human beings into two categories. They believe that the majority of attitudes and beliefs regarding women are false and wrongheaded, based on ignorance and myth. It has now become necessary to replace ignorance with

knowledge and myth with reality which is created about women and which should be first for women and then only for all people. The feminists further claim their equal right to vote and the right to substantive living which they have been denied down through centuries.

In 1960s, with the advent of post- modernism and post structuralism feminist study also found a significant place in literary theoretical front Besides, its political and cultural alignment in several streams emerged to define women's studies and it received a notable form of a theory named 'feminism' which is such an elusive, elaborate and diversified field. Feminist criticism which enunciated as a movement in literary criticism since 1960s emphasizes a different kind of reading to literature breaking the traditional monolithic way of examining literature. Feminist literary criticism establishes its relation to the movement of political feminists for social, economic and cultural freedom and equality between male and female as it emerged. In the same way, feminist criticism sometimes raises the anger against the patriarchy to create a less oppressive environment for women writers and readers. Likewise, feminist critics sometimes use wit to deconstruct the male dominated ways of behaving and seeing. Although, numerous writers were raising question against patriarchy yet some of the outstanding feminist writers of the twentieth century are Elaine Showalter, Mary Ellman, Virginia woolf, Julliet Mitchell, Helene Cixous, Toril Moil, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar.

Feminine is a second and cultural constructive form of women. When women reach a certain age and understand their gender, they are of cultural norms reversed for the female. Society considered anything unfeminine and unnatural, if she tried to disobey the social norm. The role of women in the society are cultural constructs because female infants don't know what they are, they are just like clay and it is the society which shapes

them as a female. Power is an essential weapon in human society. Likewise Kate Millet has said in *Sexual Politics* (1969): “The essence of politics is power” (205).

Feminist criticism is a politically powerful tool whose main task is to make the patriarchal society realize their rigid rules and regulation, and to make women conscious of the age, Millet reminds that fault finding is primary condition of feminism. Feminism accepting Foucauldian theory, thus sees power being exercised by men who pretend to have knowledge about everything including women. In the concern of feminist criticism, Toril Moi says, “Feminist criticism then is specific kind of political discourse, a critical and theoretical practice, committed to the struggle against patriarchy and sexism, not simply a concern for gender in literature” (204). She has indicated the advantage of recognition of feminist criticism and theory which are useful to learn social institutional and personal power relation between the sexes. Likewise, Elaine Showalter reinforces the similar concept in this way, “Feminist criticism has demanded not just the recognition of women’s writing but a radical thinking of the conceptual of literary study feminist criticism is international in its sources and feminist critics criss-cross national boundaries” (181).

Though there exists centuries of struggle for women’s rights behind it, feminism and feminist criticism did not emerge as a self-aware movement until 1960s. But after 70s, many female writers started to write about women. Some of the critics argue that feminists can not be successful in this direction even if they revolt against the patriarchy. They are bound to use the male dominated language since they don’t have their own language in writing. They somehow are bound to express the male values. Thus whether they speak or keep silent, they suffer. The main interest of feminist critics has been to reconstitute all the ways we deal with literature so that we can do justice to female point of view and images of women. Today, at the end of the twentieth century, women’s

conditions are still critical. Still, such issues like “Are there women, really?, women is womb”, “women is losing her way”, “women is lost”, women is like man, a human being” are raised about women. These are abstract declarations, which are disliked by feminist critics. Today the feminist proudly defines herself “I am a woman.” Beauvoir also agrees with this concept. Her goal is to alert the society and as a woman writer, she prefers womanhood. Beauvoir’s attitude is that each human being has an ideology which directs human being to a goal. Likewise, it seems her femininity has influenced her to revolt against the patriarchy. Dorothy Parker can be counted in as an ideal and humanitarian writer whose excellent idea that all human beings should be regarded equal. She dislikes the interpretation of a particular sex.

Feminists like Simone de Beauvoir, Betty Friedan, Kate Millet, Germaine Greer, Mary Ellmann brought a new consciousness in women’s mind generating new ideas in women’s movement. They denied the beliefs, assumptions and values defined by patriarchal institutions, which validate the vulnerability of male domination and female oppression. Kate Millet, in her book *Sexual Politics*, focuses on the idea of ideology in ‘sexual politics’ - “the unequal relation of domination and subordination is what Millet called sexual politics” (Sheldon 138). Millet opines that sex is biologically determined and gender is a cultural concept. She also used the term patriarchy to describe the course of women’s oppression. She says that even literature has served patriarchy. Feminists oppose the images of women produced by the male writers in the literature and they are involved in developing theories of sexual differences in reading, writing, critical and literary interpretation. They have derived ideas, methods and principles from different aspects of humanity: history, psychology, culture and anthropology. Feminist literary theory derived its principles and tools from different philosophical and critical frameworks.

Simon de Beauvoir, an existentialist feminist critic and writer of France, strongly oppose the tendency of treating women as second sex born to assist their male guardians. She believes that existence always precedes essence. Beauvoir strongly objects to man's attitude of discriminating between sexes as 'self' and 'other', men being the former and women the latter. Men writers have described women as 'flesh' the one related to 'nature'. In the feminist world, a subtle and radical critical mode was launched by Simon de Beauvoir with her book entitled *The Second Sex* (1949). Through this book, Beauvoir established the principles of modern feminism. She focuses upon pitiable condition of women in patriarchal society stating that where a woman tries to define herself, she starts by saying "I am a woman, no man would do so... man defines the human, not women" (Seldon 134). It reveals the fundamental asymmetry between the term masculine and feminine she argues that "man defines the human, not woman. Woman is riveted into a lopsided relation with man, he is the one, she is the other" (Sheldon 135). According to her, all the male writers assume the female as a negative.

In the book, the problem Beauvoir emphasizes is that women perceive man as self (as subject) and themselves as other. And she explicitly exposes the condition of women so that they could realize their existence. She says:

[W]omen have been essential as the one born. To be a wife or a mother. But she is stripped off motherly rights because motherly rights are also over powered by fatherly rights. A wife's duty is to be in the bed to gratify the husband's lust but the husband is not aware whether he is gratifying the lust of his wife. (145)

Women, therefore, is inessential in the eyes of men who want to accept her as 'other.'

Elaine showalter, a prominent American feminist and literary critic, has entitled women's writing and women's culture in which she says that women have their own

types of culture. They have their own type of body, the speaking styles, the languages, the capacity of thinking and behaving, the psyche, all are their own sorts and males have their own. So, they are naturally different. In the discussion of women languages, Showalter asserts that feminist criticism is in the wilderness. Showalter divided the women feminist critics into two groups. The feminist criticism is the ideological mode and concerned with woman as readers. This period is women's learning process about their stereotyped images, it considers the omissions of misconception about the women in criticism and fissures in male constructed literary history. The second mode is study of women as writers. She calls it 'gynocritics' and provide the subjects, the history, style, themes, genres, and structure of writing by women. It seeks a female model. According to Showalter, gynocritics construct a female framework for the analysis of women's literature. They develop new models based on the study of female experience. Gynocritics is related to feminist research in history, anthropology, psychology and sociology.

Showalter formulates three categories to adjust British women writers in the past and present according to their intensity of female voice. They are feminine, feminist and female phase. The first phase dating from 1840 to 1880, in this phase, writers like Elizabeth Gaskell, George Eliot and Bronte sisters imitated and internalized the dominant male aesthetic standards. Their works dealt with the domestic and social background. Women wrote with an effort to equal those intellectual achievements of male culture. They were so curious that they imitated the masculine mode which they tried to perform it in feminine concern. The second phase dated from 1880 to 1920. it was a challenging period for women for self demand and to protest upon their cruelty. It includes the writers such as Elizabeth Robins and Olive Schreiner, who protested against male values. The third phase dated from 1920 onwards. Rebecca West, Katherine Mansfield and Dorothy Richardson were the feminist writers of this period. In this period, women were more

aware of their genders. They realized their importance in society and, so, this phase is a phase of self discovery in which women's experiences are their main purpose, they rejected both imitation and protest.

Helen Cixous is modern feminist critic. Like Showalter and Beauvoir, she also gives importance to women's existence and her participation in society. According to her, "women's imaginary is inexhaustible and her writing is wonderful like music and painting" (541). Elsewhere she writes, "I write women, women must write woman and man, man". She further expresses her experience of a woman who is a unique being. In her famous essay "The laugh of the Medusa", Cixous calls for women to put their bodies into their writing. She says, "A woman's body with its thousand and one threshold of order... will make the old single grooved mother tongue reverberate with more than one language" (151).

Susan Gubar has analysed stereotypes such as women as angels. Later on social scientists and social historians like Jessie Bernard has diagnosed that the patriarchal socialization was totally unfit or unhealthy for woman. Most feminist claim themselves of revisionist Likewise, Gilbert has pointed out the aim of the feminist criticism: " The feminist criticism wants to decode and demystify all the disguised question and answers that have always shadowed of the connections between textuality and sexuality, genre and gender, psychosexual identify and cultural authority" ( 334).

These are the burning but common topics of discussion which are still obscure. The women writers say that the male critics have produced their own experiences which are universal. So, feminist critics invite women to create theoretical grounds which are genuinely women centred, independent, and intellectually coherent because they have their own subjects, systems and voices.

In 1970s and 80s, the racial difference became a key focus for feminist criticism. Many Black feminist like Alice Walker, Maya Angelou and Tony Morrison etc established the literary and critical forum and started voicing out their agonies as marginalized and doubly oppressed (as black women) in their works. A black woman is oppressed by patriarchy, black feminists observe, not just because she's a woman but because she's a black woman, a category that has been defined historically in America as less valuable than the white woman. The Victorian ideals of the true woman as submissive, fragile, and sexually pure, which still influence patriarchal thinking today, excluded black women and poor women of all races, whose survival demanded hard physical labor and who were vulnerable to rape and to sexual exploitation in the workplace. Being black and women they are doubly suppressed. They are victimized by black men as well as the white society. White mainstream feminism marginalize black women because of their race, nevertheless encourages them to prioritize gender issues over racial issues, arguing that black women are oppressed more by sexism than by racism. At the same time, the black male community marginalize black women because of their gender, nevertheless encourages them to prioritize racial issues over gender issues, arguing that black women are oppressed more by racism than by sexism. Lorraine Bethel observes the double oppression in this manner:

Black feminist literary criticism offers a framework for identifying the common socio-aesthetic problems of authors who attempt to fashion a literature of cultural identity in the midst of racial/sexual oppression. It incorporated a political analysis that enables us to comprehend and appreciate the incredible achievement Black women... made in establishing artistic and literary traditions of any sort, and to understand their qualities and sensibilities. Such understanding requires a



consciousness of the oppression these artists faced daily in a society full of institutionalized and violent hatred for both their black skins and their female bodies. Developing and maintaining this consciousness is a basic tenet of Black feminism. (178)

Several black female writers argue that historically black women have been stereotyped as sex objects and breeders. The white women were also oppressing black women. They view black women as sexual temptress of white men and prostitute. These stereotypes and myth have helped control black women's characters in the society from the time of slavery black women have always been exploited as the object of white male sexual assault. The mainstream society still perceives and represents black women as fallen women, whores and prostitute. They often become the victim of rape because sexism of white male was socially legitimized. In *Ain't I a woman: black woman and feminism* (1981), Bell Hooks writes "Rape was a method used to terrorize, dehumanized and [...] to trip the female slave of dignity" (36). Black men can no longer protect them because they themselves are in dehumanized situation.

The black female experience is characterized by the interlocking oppressors of rape, class. These oppressors are interwoven into social structures and work together to define the history of the lives of black woman of color. According to the writers like Bell Hooks, the history of these cultural oppressors can be traced black to slavery. Within her book, *Ain't I A Woman : Black Woman and Feminism*, Hooks asserts that "as far as black slavery, white people established a social hierarchy based on race and sex, that ranked white men first, white women second, though some times equal to black men who ranked third, and black woman last" (53). Black women have been defined and categorized in dehumanizing term, term employed to attack the essence of black women's sense of personal integrity and self worth.

Black feminism is both a re-evaluation of African femininity in respect to African communities and men, and a re-examination of racial and cultural differences between women. Under white domination a black man finds that his male ego is wounded. So he starts his endless cruelty on his women finding no other role model than that of the white man. White women and black men both act as oppressors or oppressed. White women may be victimized by sexism but racism enables them to act as exploiters and oppressors of black people. Black men may be victimized by racism, but sexism allows them act as an exploiters and oppressors of women. But black women have no such “other” upon which they could act as oppressor. It was the long term silence of the oppressed and the continual devaluation of black womanhood that passed a way towards black feminism. In addition to the sexual violence and cultural stereotyping, various authors suggested that the women of color have been excluded from the women’s movement.

The modern women’s movement has also been accused of concentrating only on the perspective and concerns of white middle class women concern of women of color and their struggles have been marginalized , slighted and even ignored within the agenda of the white women’s movement. Therefore black and women of color have expressed their reluctance in aligning themselves with it. Hooks, in the book *Ain’t I A Woman*, concluded that “the women’s movement had drawn black and white women closer together, instead it exposed the fact that white women were not willing to relinquish their support of white supremacy to support the issues of all women” (136). In resistance to the marginalization, theories of black feminism and womanism were forged. These two theoretical concepts were developed to draw attention of the concerned agencies towards multiple oppressions experienced by women of color, reflecting and defining their everyday experiences in their own terms.

Many black female writers view feminism as a movement that is exclusively for women and dedicated to attacking or eliminating men. The author and theorist Alice Walker, rejects the term 'feminist' and called herself a "womanist" because she works for the survival and wholeness of her people, both men and female, and for the promotion of dialogue and community as well as for the valorization of women and of all the varieties of work women perform. Similarly, Carolyn Denard points out, many African American woman "advocate what may be called ethnic cultural feminism" (172), which is "concerned more with the particular female cultural values of their own ethnic group rather than with those of women in general" (171), Denard explains that ethnic cultural feminism acknowledges the damaging effects of sexism on women of color, both inside and outside their ethnic community, but it "does not advocate as a solution to their oppression... political feminism that alienates black women from their ethnic group" (172).

In black literature, Black female writers arose the issues of motherhood, celebration of black culture, native language, their battle with the society for their equal economical, political and sexual rights. Alice Walker universalizes what are typically seen as individual struggle while simultaneously allowing space for autonomous movement of self-determination. In her book, *In Search of Mother's Garden* she defines a womanist as a black feminist or feminist of color, an outrageous and audacious woman who loves other women both sexually and non-sexual, a woman who appreciates and prefers women's culture: strength and emotional flexibility. In her novel, *Everyday Use* (1973) Walker identifies black female creativity from earlier generations in such folk arts as quilting, music, and gardening. In *You can't Keep a Good Woman Down*, her second volume of short stories, Walker deals with the female issues like pornography, abortion, and rape from blatantly womanist perspectives. In stories like "Porn", "A Letter of the

Times” and “Coming Apart” Walker attacks pornography, sado-masochism and violence against the black women. Walker’s faith in black women’s strength and creative powers is further revealed in the story “A Sudden Trip Home in the Spring” in which Sarah Davis like Celie in *The color purple* survives and triumphs over the oppression. Thus Walker demonstrates that black women were free to peruse their selfhood in a society permeated by sexism and racism.

Similarly Gwendolyn Brooks, a famous black woman poet depicted the real black experience, day-by-day scene of black American life and defining Negro life in her works and also shows the realities of frustrated desire and broken hope. Her poetry and autobiographical fiction also tells the tragedy of black life in America. In her poetry collection *Annie Allen* (1949), she tries to present Negroes (blacks) not as curios but as people. Later, even when black anger began to enter her work, Brooks continued to express herself with great beauty. *Malcolm X* (1968), one of her most famous poems, uses sexual images to describe about the black revolutionary leader. She has emphasized her consciousness of race above sex, but the content and feeling of her writing fall within the bounds of women’s literature. Zora Neale Hurston, another black novelist and Harlem Renaissance figure and folklore insist upon using authentic black dialect and folklore in her folktale book *Mules and Men* (1935) and her novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937). In *Mule and Men*, Hurston writes about the Southern Negro’s reactions to everyday events, their emotional life, their humor and their passions. The title describes the black woman’s place as a mule, a beast of burden. It is an invaluable piece of cultural history. The book contributes to the knowledge of the inner life of Southern blacks. Toni Morrison, the black feminist and novelist, in her novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970) shows the victimization, the heroine Pecola becomes the victim of incestuous victimization. She prays for her eyes to turn blue so that she will be as beautiful as beloved as all the blond,

blue-eyes children in America, in the autumn of 1941, the year the marigold in the Breedlove's garden do not bloom. Pecola's life does change in painful, devastating ways. She ultimately becomes a victim of man's insanity, wildness and cruelty. The novel also shows how gender issues intersect with race. Her novel *Beloved* revealed the impact of slavery and of the emancipation of slaves on individual black people.

Likewise, Ama Ata Aidoo, a Ghanaian playwright and short story writer in her semi-autobiographical novel, *Our Sister Killjoy* (1977) dealt with the encounter between African and European cultures and the psychological impact of post-colonialism on women, the young heroine, Sissie, is disillusioned and alienated by her experience in England and in the heart of darkness of Bavaria, Germany. She feels uncomfortable about the use of a language that "enslaved" her and she experiences racism and ignorance about Africa throughout her journeys. The novel is almost inevitably a working out of her rage against white oppressors and their Ghanaian abettors.

Black feminist criticism of the late 1980s and 1990s for instance, Marjorie Pryse and Hortense Spillers, editors of *Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction and the Literary Tradition* (1985) and Joanne Braxton and Andree McLaughlin, editors of *Wild Women in the Whirlwind* (1990), began to create a black aesthetic. These works and many others retrieved black women's lost texts, placed them in history, described myths and women's traditions which proved that black narratives, while not necessarily wanting to be like the text of post structuralism, could be said to be more akin in some of their textual features to poststructuralist texts than many white critical texts. In other words, black criticism was not simply a self-naming, distinctive or essentially 'other' school or method alongside white criticism, but was permeating and transforming the whole agenda of feminist criticism.

As a result of this struggle, African American women's ideas and experiences have achieved a visibility unthinkable in the past. So the major breakthrough in the women's liberation movement is the humanist vision reflected in the works of contemporary African American women intellectual. They celebrate black culture, tradition and their genesis and believe that they possess rich cultural and sexual properties as black and as female. They try to situate the study of black women's writing in the context of black history and culture and explore its thematic and stylistic correspondence with the literature of black men as well as investigate its special use of language and imagery. These feminist writers have revolutionized the role of women in society and forged the concept of "the emergent women" (Washington 214)

Belindra Kremer in 1991 talks about gender issues which affects feminist researchers. She also agrees with Sandra Gillbert's demand of sisterhood of 1979. Kremer asserts that women's knowledge and experience are crucial to understand the socially constructed world and only a woman can truly and fully understand others. To develop women, women themselves have to face difficulties and dilemmas of patriarchal setting.

Feminism came into existence to solve women's social problems. There are different kinds of attempts to classify the feminism, according to ideological streams such as liberal, radical, socialist and Marxist. Liberal feminism emphasizes social equality and opportunity for the development of women. Radical feminists give importance to femaleness and celebrate the feminine values and traits. Socialists are particularly concerned about women's social rights. Their aims are to unionize women workers on the matter of better wages and conditions and according to Marxism, all human beings are politically and socially at the same level, and they should also have the same economic power to maintain a dominant role in society.

Besides feminists, all the development agencies too have realized the need for educating women to promote and maintain family education, health, nutrition, gender issue and general well being indeed, the education of women is a big necessity in any society. In *Women and Human Rights* (1995) Katering Tomasevski has demanded human rights for women. She writes that “women indeed do not enjoy the rights and freedoms to which they are entitled by the mere fact that they are human” (ix). Tomasevski quite disagrees with the social notion and says that “not all women are mothers. More important those who are not mothers only they are also workers, electors, medical doctors, political prisoners, trade union leader, immigrants, soldiers, or refugees “(ix).

The writer here demands equal human rights which should be protected for possible women’s advancement. Thus, modern feminists are more alert of their existence. The earlier aim of feminism was different from the recent aim. The women writers express their desire that women should also be a part of history, and they emphasis upon equality and legal reform for women’s rights. In this concern, Tomasevski says that “the present day feminism is a struggle for a achievement of women’s equality, dignity and freedom of choice to control our lives and bodies within outside the home” (34).

The women of the third world are not enjoying their humanity. Instead of developing women’s personality, the new age has added more responsibility upon women. The world is not completely modern because half of its population lacks humanity. So, most of the feminists, who are concerned with the discrimination prevailing in various aspects of this world, demand equal rights for all human beings.

### III. Female Resistance in *Possessing The Secret of Joy*

In the patriarchal society, women are considered as inferior and passive. They are not supposed to develop their own interest. They have to rather enjoy what their husbands enjoy. Women are oppressed and exploited by the males. They are always considered as different from men. They have often been the target of male sexual violence. They are forced to fulfill men's purpose and expected to serve men. The feminist scholars define the term "patriarchy" as "the rule of the father, including the rule of older men over younger men and of fathers over daughters, as well as husbands over wives" (284). It's a historical process formed by men and women with patriarchal family serving as a basic unit of organization. Kate Millet, in her *Sexual Politics*, argues that patriarchy subordinates the female to the male or treats the female as an inferior male increasing self-realization and gaining empowerment.

When there is suppression, there must be resistance. Suppression and resistance go side by side. In the society, when resistance appears, the powerful authority always tries to suppress others with the forces of power. But resistance often emerges from others when they are suppressed. Resistance for what? Resistance for injustice and against the oppressor. While talking about female resistance, it is merely concerned with the issues of women's identity, autonomy, selfhood etc. Female resistance to injustice of males in the sexist and racist society and to the domination of patriarchal society. The novel, *Possessing The Secret of Joy*, depicts the protagonist's resistance to the ritual of female genital mutilation which is practised mainly in the African patriarchal society. In the novel, Walker addresses how the female genital mutilation ritual in a specific African tribe affects the mind, body, and spirit of the protagonist. Tashi's psychological turmoil along with her failure to forget her sister Dura's screams and death due to the so called ritual of female genital mutilation of Olinka Village leads her to kills M'Lissa, an agent



and the aged circumciser of the patriarchal society. Killing of M'Lissa symbolizes Tashi's resistance to the ritual of female circumcision and it projects her struggle against the oppressor. Even though murder is a negative version of liberation, Tashi shows her courage to change a situation that prevents the African female self from blossoming into wholeness. Tashi's destruction of M'Lissa presents the case that women should not continue "destroying" the joy and pride of womanhood in an attempt to serve the masculinist myth sanctioning the lack of female self-empowerment. Only through resistance can the continued abuse of women everywhere finally be eradicated, as she is released from her tortured soul for "killing someone who, many years ago, killed me" (274). In this gripping novel, Walker uses her main character's pain to immediately grab the reader's attention. Tashi, protagonist of the novel, expresses her anguish in the first sentence of the novel, "I did not realize for a long time that I was dead" (3). Her death of course, is not a physical one, but rather an emotional one resulted by the female circumcision she undergoes by her own choice.

A major theme of the novel is female genital mutilation, which is also called female circumcision. There are three type of female genital mutilation: clitoridectomy, the partial, or whole removal of the clitoris in which the bleeding is stopped with pressure or a stitch; excision, where both the clitoris and the inner lips are amputated and the bleeding is stooped with stitching and infibulation, the removal of the whole clitoris and some or all the labia minora. Infibulation also includes incisions in the labia majora, done to create raw surfaces, which are either stitched together or kept in contact by keeping the legs together as they heal until a "hood of skin" covering the urethra and most of the vagina appears. In the immediate sense, circumcision can result into infection due to unsterile conditions, an inability to urinate, shock and damage to the urethra or anus, which may be caused by an inexperienced circumciser or sudden movements by the girl.

These complications are compounded in the case of infibulation. The possibility of hemorrhage is greater and, because the wound area is so much larger, so is the risk of infection and abscessed.

Tashi undergoes the procedure as a symbol of unity, loyalty to her village. In the name of Olinkan pride, she gives up her sexuality to preserve the old ways. Like “our leader, our Jesus Christ said we must keep all our old ways” (122). The leaders, too, instruct the Olinkans that “we must not neglect our ancient customs” (117). One being “the female initiation...into womanhood” (119). Tashi tells her psychiatrist that she is more than willing to give up sexual pleasure in order “to be accepted as a real woman. By the Olinka people; to stop the jeering” (122). In the session with Raye, Tashi discusses their leaders like Nelson Mandela and Jomo Kenytha who were like Jesus Christ for them. She said that “our leader said we must keep ourselves clean and pure as we had been since time immemorial by cutting our unclean parts of our bodies” (121). So, “she went under the tsunga knife” (120). By doing this, she intends to express her solidarity to the other women whom she envisions as completely strong and invincible African women. When Adam comes for Tashi, M’Lissa tells him that Tashi wants to be circumcised. She says, “with a grimace of justification, if was the grownup daughter who had come to her, wanting the operation because she recognized it as the only remaining definitive stamp of Olinka tradition” (64). She further adds “the operation she’d had done to herself joined her, she felt, to these women, whom she envisioned as strong, invincible. Completely woman. Completely African. Completely Olinka.” (64). In America as Adam’s wife, Tashi reminisces on her African experience. Even though Olivia tells her not to go to the ritual, Tashi wants to undergo genital mutilation and also have a scar, tribal sign marked on her face. Both are painful but they are the signifiers of her idiosyncratic African identity. She argues, “We had been stripped of everything but our

black skins, here and there a defiant cheek bore the mark of our withered tribe. These marks gave me courage. I wanted such a mark for myself” (24). She says that her “people had once been whole pregnant with life” (24). But the receiving of the mark almost destroys Tashi physically and emotionally.

There was a myth in the village that if a woman is not circumcised then her unclean parts will grow long enough to touch her thighs. The circumcised women do not remember having vaginal lips or a clitoris, so they laugh and jeer at the monstrous tail and circumcised girls run from “the demon.” The tribe passes on unverified beliefs because the old ways must be kept. The girls have to be circumcised at proper age. Otherwise, no one will marry them. According to the Adam, “the other women in the camp...had all been initiated at the proper age. Either shortly after birth, or at the age of five or six, but certainly by the onset of puberty, ten or eleven” (63-64). There is also a myth that if someone makes a sexual intercourse in the field then crops would not grow:

In Olinka society the strongest taboo was against making love in the fields. So strong was this taboo that no one in living memory had broken it. And yet, we did. And because no one in the society could imagine us capable of such an offense lovemaking in the fields jeopardized the crops; indeed, it was declared that if there was any fornication whatsoever in the fields the crops definitely would not grow. No one ever saw us, and the fields produced their harvests as

before. (27)

Female circumcision is culturally important for Olinka village. It's practiced mainly in order to ensure a girl's virginity or purity before marriage. Even the males of Olinka wouldn't think of marrying a woman, who has not been circumcised. Without circumcision, a girl cannot marry and is thereby unable to fulfill her intended role. The procedure of circumcision is so ingrained in the society that myths concerning uncircumcised women have been accepted as truths. Tashi says that everyone believes it, even though no one has ever seen it, no one living in their village anyway and yet the elders, particularly, acted as if everyone had witnessed this evil, and not nearly a long enough time ago. Despite her earlier sexual experiences, Tashi tells her psychiatrist that her "own body was a mystery to her" (121). Along with the belief that a woman's clitoris will grow like a man's penis and make penetration impossible, there is also the myth that if a man's penis touched the uncut clitoris, he would become impotent. The missionaries spoke out against such traditions as circumcision and facial scarring and the Olinkas would give them their "mumbled prayers and conversions" (118) but they keep on the practice of their ancient customs because "our leader had these markings, and was obviously proud of them, and so it was difficult to hear the missionaries objections" (118). The procedure, itself, is a secret known only to the circumciser, an occupation passed down from generation to generation.

Every culture and tradition has its own value. Olinka village has a tradition of female circumcision which is significant for them though women are suppressed physically as well as emotionally since they are born in the sexist and racist society. They are dominated in the name of cultural heritage. It is very difficult to eradicate the ritual constructed by the males in the patriarchal society. In the novel, Tashi tries to eradicate the ritual or tradition that gives them nothing except the pain and suffering. She struggles

against the tradition that destroys the black female selfhood. She destroys the agent M'Lissa, who is always admired for the role in the village but especially after the liberation wars, she is honored by the Olinka government for "her unfailing adherence to the ancient customs and traditions of the Olinka state" (149). She was taken as "National monument" (149).

By killing M'Lissa, Tashi, finally, discovers herself as an autonomous woman. In the process of forging female selfhood, she emphasizes upon the need to change the ritual. She struggles to claim her self and her right to self determination beyond cultural constraints, too. She resists the taboos and when taboos are broken, new forms and modes of discourse must evolve to contain that which is unspeakable. Her psychological tension including her emotional anguish that she experiences daily in the name of her tribal leader's call for Olinkan pride, this bad experience of physical and emotional pain encourages her to revolt against the ritual that she has undergone. The days after the operation, when Tashi is told to sit up and walk a few steps, "her own proud walk had become a shuffle" (65). It takes fifteen minutes to urinate now. Her menstrual cramps lasts half a month because it is nearly impossible for urine to pass through so tiny an aperture. The residual flow does not find its way out, and is not reabsorbed into her body and has nowhere to go. So the odor of soured blood follows her around.

Tashi has never forgotten how her sister Dura bled to death during the ritual of genital mutilation, without even having the right to voice her agony, since the dictum determines, "You mustn't cry!" (15). She did hear the screams of her older sister all the night and she represses this memory which leads her to murder M'Lissa:

I remembered my sister Dura's ... my sister Dura's... I could get no further.

there was boulder lodged in my throat. My heart surged pitifully. I knew  
 what

boulder was; that it was a word; and that behind that word I would find my  
 earliest emotions. Emotions that had frightened me insane... before the  
 boulder barred my throat: my sister's death; because that was how I had  
 always thought of Dura's demise. She's d simply died. She'd bled and bled  
 and bled and then there was death... I remember my sister Dura's  
 murder...

I felt a painful stitch throughout my body that I knew stitched my tears to  
 my

Soul. No longer would my weeping be separate from what I knew. (82-83)  
 She can't forget her sister's demise. She has never slept well all the night. She can't talk  
 about her dreams with the doctor.

What about your dreams? The doctor one day asks me.

I tell him I do not dream.

I do not dare tell him about the dream I have every night that terrifies me.

(25)

The voiceless pain still troubles Tashi, now Evelyn Johnson in the United States. In her  
 terrifying dreams, to the degree that she tries to mutilate herself in her sleep, a  
 subconscious act to share Dura's pain to be rid of the guilt of having failed to reach out  
 and help her. She says that "she has been screaming in my ears since it happened" (83).  
 So these repressed memories terrify her since Dura got what they called barbaric "bath."  
 In response to Tashi, M'Lissa says that "if Dura is not bathed... no one will marry her"  
 (257).

She says that female circumcision is equally important for every black woman. Women have to go through it before getting married. No matter whether their husbands have got highly reputed post in the society or a woman belongs to ordinary person. The “bath” is equal for everyone. She says that “one heard his own wives screaming when their time came. Did he care? No. every man’s wife screamed at the appropriate time” (256).

Tashi’s anger and bitterness is seen when she comes to know the close relationship between Adam and Lisette and she can’t endure seeing them together:

It is hard for me to think about the conversations Adams and Lisette must have had about the over the years, on his twice yearly visits to Paris and her

annual visit to California. often, while she is visiting, I have had to be sedated.

on occasion I have voluntarily checked myself into the Waverly Psychiatric

hospital, in which, because it is run by a man affiliated with Adam’s ministry,

I am always given a room. (49)

She attempts to preserve her sexuality but it is the ritual that almost destroyed her sexuality. Lisette, a French woman, Adam’s friend and mistress, seems to have kept what Tashi has lost in pain, since she enjoys her womanhood without physical and emotional pain. This is why Tashi stones Pierre, Lisette’s son from Adam, born out of wedlock in France, in order to prevent his entrance to their home.

As Pierre thanked the driver and turned toward the house, he saw me, and smiled. A large jagged stone, gray as grief, struck him just above the teeth. Blood spurted from his nose. I began to throw the stones as if, like kali, I

had a dozen arms, or as if my arms were a multiple catapult or a windmill.

Stones rained upon him and upon the cab. (145).

Pierre began to speak in gibberish French, which infuriates her. She drops the stones in order to close her ears with the palms of her hands. During this interlude, the Cabbie runs up to Pierre, grabs him under the arms and drags him out of sight. She expresses her fury in this manner:

I began to laugh, as the taxi disappeared down the street. In their cowardly haste they'd forgotten Pierre's luggage. the brown suitcases sat, importunate and irrevocable, where he'd dropped them; more heavy baggage for me to lift and somehow carry. I would not. I dove forward, flapping my arms, and shrieking hoarsely like a crow, to kick them into the street. (145)

Kicking the suitcase symbolizes her resistance, anger toward the tradition that gives her nothing but mental torture. She is physically and emotionally damaged which is the main cause for her inability to make a sexual intercourse with Adam and her jealousy makes her open with her duplicate key Adam's hidden drawer and read the letter that Lisette has sent to Adam: "I trampled them. I routinely, and leisurely, read those from her which Adam Left lying open at the back of his bottom desk drawer, the key to which I had long since duplicated. It was from one of her letters that I learned their son, Pierre, was coming to America" (143).

She is unhappy to see them together; her anger can be observed when she slaps a man who is introduced by Adam: "'Ah, Adam and Evelyn, how cute!' and I slapped him" (144) and she "felt the violence rising in me with every encounter with the world outside my home" (144). After mutilation, Tashi can not make sexual intercourse with her



husband. This is the main cause of Adam's attraction towards Lisette. He loves her very much as he writes in a letter to Lisette: "How much I would like to see you, to hold you, to have not slept, and I am writing outside in the loggia by the light of a candle, just as the sun is rising over the lake" (76). He further says, "I had always been careful with Lisette. More often than not, when we were making love, I did not penetrate her" (97).

Lisette's joy of womanhood and motherhood is something Tashi is doomed never to experience with Adam, who, in the past, was unable to penetrate her for three months because of her circumcision: "[E]ach time he touched me I bled. Each time he moved against me I winced. There was nothing he could do to me that did not hurt" (60). The birthing process is difficult for most circumcised women but it is miracle that Tashi becomes pregnant with her son Benny. The thought of giving birth frightens Tashi. Not only does she have the fear of the pain involved, but the local medical community is amazed at her situation. She talks of the "quick stepping American nurses looking at me as if I were some creature from beyond their imagination" (60). Finally Tashi gave a birth to mentally retarded baby. Benny, "radiant brown baby" (61) a "small but vital part of his brain crushed by our ordeal" (61).

How did that big baby... even get up in there, Mrs. Johnson? That's what I'd like to know. He grinned, as if he'd never heard of the aggressive mobility of sperm, I attempted a smile I was incapable of feeling, first in his direction and then down at the baby in my arms. His head was yellow and blue and badly misshapen, I had no idea how to shape it properly, but hoped that once the

doctor left, instinct would teach me. Nor could I imagine asking him for any

instructions at all. (57)

These lines show the suffering and pain of a black mother who undergoes the pain of getting the abnormal baby. She is shocked to see the baby and confused regarding what to do or how to react to such a situation. She has no idea how to shape her baby's head in proper way but she hopes that instinct would teach her. Adam also feels unhappy when he came to know about the baby. He is too embarrassed to speak with Tashi: "He coughed whenever he was embarrassed or nervous; now he cleared his throat repeatedly closer, but did not touch me; the sound in his throat causing my own to close. After a moment, I withdrew my hand" (58). She says, "I felt as if there was a loud noise of something shattering on the hard floor, there between me and Adam and our baby and the doctor. But there was only a ringing silence. Which seemed oddly, after a moment, like the screaming of monkeys." (59).

Tashi is broken down physically and emotionally even she can not sleep well in the hospital as she says that "when the nurse had taken him away, I turned my face to the wall and slept. I slept so long and so hard it was always necessary for nurse to shake me when it was time for a feeding." (61). There is also "the question of what to do with "the hole" (61), as the doctor calls it. Soon they decide to sew it: "[M]y doctor sewed me up again, much as I'd been fastened originally, because otherwise there would have been a yawning unhealable wound" (61).

The novel is about the exploration of Tashi's battle with madness and the revelation of personal redemption and female oppression and female empowerment which challenges some of the most basic assumptions of the main stream culture. Tashi cannot rationalize the emotional anguish she experiences daily in the name of Olinkan pride. So

she sees several psychiatrists. The first one tells her that the Negro women cannot be cured “because they can never bring themselves to blame their mothers” (19). Tashi still thinks of herself as an African woman even after immigrated to United States. Another psychiatrist, Lisette’s white uncle the old man or Mzee, tries to help Tashi in Switzerland with art therapy and by analyzing her dreams, which she cannot share with her husband. Tashi is unable to deal with the horror that genital mutilation evokes in her. She responds by painting cocks, by painting a huge peacock on the wall, exhausting the space available and forcing open the boundaries of imagination. Her psychological tension which she expresses as “emotions that had frightened me insane” (83) has reached such an enormous proportion that she cannot control it. Once the repressed pain and fear rises to the surface of her conscious mind, Tashi, conditioned by the taboo, does not verbalize pain, and yet is compelled to give an outlet to her feelings. She can only deal with them through a non verbal medium. After the death of old man, the black feminist Raye can understand Tashi’s physical pain after having periodontal surgery. Tashi shares her problem with her: “[T]he initiation... still she looked at me in the same questioning way. The female initiation, I said. Into womanhood. Oh? She said. But looked still as if she didn’t understand. Circumcision, I whispered” (119).

Tashi’s personal anguish cannot be assuaged by Pierre’s anthropological facts, the old man’s analytical psychology or Raye’s empathy alone. She premeditates on killing the old circumciser M’Lissa. Tashi returns to Olinka when she reads about M’Lissa’s becoming a venerated symbol of the village. “Mother Lissa is a national monument... recognized as a heroine by every faction of the government, including the national liberation front” (154). As Mbatia adds, “[S]he is the only woman honored in this way by the government; she is an ikon” (154).

Tashi and M'Lissa talk over a period of several weeks. Tashi now comes to realize that how she has been physically and emotionally destroyed by the barbaric ritual that gives her nothing except depression and frustration. But M'Lissa disagrees with Tashi. She emphasizes upon the ritual and its importance though M'Lissa herself is as much a victim of the ritual as Tashi and Dura are. She still believes in its validity, convinced that is performed. "[i]n service to tradition, to what makes us a people. In service to the country and what makes us who we are" (226). For an honor, M'Lissa thinks that "from the time of memory, always, in my family, the women were tsunga" (219). Her conception that the pain a woman feels in preserving and transmitting the tradition is insignificant which runs contrary to Tashi's personal experience. M'Lissa has sewn her so tightly that intercourse has proved to be very difficult for Adam and her. What causes Tashi's loss of self control, however, makes her commit the murder.

M'Lissa, who is in favor of an ancient tradition, focuses upon the importance of the ritual, as they called it bathed. She claims that "there are women walking around today who've paid the tsunga to make them tighter than that! After each birth of a child they do it, more than once, more than twice, more than three times, they've had it done. Each time tighter than before" (245). And she further argues that "the men like it tight. Fighting don't think the women never receive pleasure" (245). So, she emphasizes upon the procedure enjoyed by not only men but by women as well. They have paid the tsungas to make them tighter than before. In response, Tashi argues that she has never experienced that kind of pleasure. M'Lissa replies that "the pleasure a woman receives comes from her own brain. The brain sends it to any spot a lover can touch" (246). Tashi claims, "Then why is it that it is a woman's vulva that is destroyed? I ask. "Bathed", as they say, "cleaned off," I ask. And not her shoulder or her neck? Not her breasts?" (246).

She argues why only woman's vulva that is destroyed? Why not her shoulder, her neck or her breasts. How it could be possible that a circumcised woman can get a sexual pleasure.

Walker demonstrates that the protagonist rises from the condition of nothingness to the position of self empowerment. Previously, Tashi was totally passive, submissive woman who accepted everything imposed by the male dominated society. She didn't have such a confidence or self awareness. She accepted the procedure by her own choice in order to prove her loyalty: "I could never have that look of confidence of pride. Of peace. Neither possession will always be impossible for us to claim" (273). So, Tashi had never experienced that sort of confidence before. But later, when she comes to realize that the ritual gives nothing to her except the physical and mental trauma, then gradually she is seeking to understand her position in life and in the male oriented society.

The novel revolves around the domination of black women. They are physically and psychologically suppressed by the males in the name of tradition. The ritual is often performed with the crude instruments and under unsanitary conditions causing infections and chronic pain to the women: "[L]ittle 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" (284). The girls are abused and violated when they were being to forced under the shards of unwashed glass, tin- can tops. Most of the girls and young women are dying because of rusty razors and dull knives used by tsungas:

The little girls who are dying, and the women too, are infected by the unwashed, unsterilized sharp stones, tin tops, bits of glass, rusty razors and grungy knives used by the tsunga. Who might mutilate twenty children without cleaning her instrument. There is also the fact that almost every act

of intercourse involves tearing and bleeding, especially in a woman's early

years. (251-52)

Tashi's bitterness and anger towards the procedure can be seen easily as she says: "Is it cruel to say this? I feel it is cruel; but that it is only the cruelty of truth, speaking it, shouting it, that will save us now. If we do not, Africa may well be depopulated of black people in our grand children's lifetime, and the worldwide suffering of our children will continue to be our curse" (275). The above lines depicts that we must have to speak and shout out against the tradition which almost destroyed all the girls and young women's body. If we cannot speak against it then it will be difficult to prevent the agony of the black women worldwide.

For Olinkan people, the taboo plays a significant role in their life. They can not speak any sort of thing against it. In the court, Adam speaks about the condition of his wife. He argues how the ritual has destroyed her whole life. She is tortured, broken down physically and emotionally:

He is saying I am a tortured woman. Someone whose whole life was destroyed by the enactment of a ritual upon my body which I had not been equipped to understand. As soon as he utters the word "ritual" there is a furor in the court. Male voices, and female voices, calling for Adam's silence. Shut up, shut up, you disgraceful American! The voices cry. This is our business you would put into the streets! We cannot publicly discuss this taboo.

(163)

As he speaks out against the ritual that has violated her wife physically and emotionally, he raises a voice against the cruelty of the tradition. But the Olinkan people wouldn't

agree whatever Adam claims. They are calling for Adam's silence. They are not in favor of discussing the taboo publicly. They believe in the tradition as the voices hiss in the courtroom: "[M]other Lissa was a monument... your wife has murdered a monument. The grand mother of the race" (163).

Female genital mutilation is nothing less than ritual to torture the girls and young women of Olinka village. After the organs are cut out, women are often sewn up tightly, barely allowing the passing of urine and menstrual blood. For them making sexual intercourse is supremely painful and impossible. Tashi has undergone the experience of the violence, injustice and cruelties. Walker depicts the emotional and physical devastation of the protagonist and the black women's struggle to claim their selves. In order to change their lives, by killing M'Lissa, an agent of patriarchy, Tashi gets redemption, freedom, resisting oppression and domination imposed by patriarchal society:

I killed her all right. I placed a pillow over her face and lay across it for an hour... she had told me it was traditional for a well appreciated tsunga to be murdered by someone she circumcised, the burned... it is curious, is it not, that the traditional tribal society dealt so cleverly with its appreciation of the tsunga and its hatred of her. but of course the tsunga was to the traditional elders merely a witch they could control, an extension of their own dominating power. (276-77)

Tashi seems to be furious as she places a pillow over M'Lissa face and lays across it for an hour which is enough time to kill her. Her deep anger towards the males is shown in the courtroom when she screams at them: "Can you bear to know what I have lost? I

scream this at the judges, in their stupid white wigs. And at the lawyer” (35). She says at the court that males can never understand the pain and suffering of women. She has lost her freedom, selfhood, motherhood in the male oriented society in order to please the males. Due to her psychological and physical trauma, Tashi is afraid of living in the sexist and racist society. She wants to live the world of fantasy. As she says, “[M]y fantasy life. Without it I’m afraid to exist. Who am I?” (36). Her desire to live the fantasy life is arisen by her agony she has got from her society. Without it she couldn’t exist. Having a great pain after mutilated, as Adam says, “[S]he is upright, clutching her pillow. Her eyes are enormous. She is shaking with fear” (26).

Sexual repression and violation upon black female body is the dominant theme of the novel. The women are victimized by this horrible practice. They are broken and fragmented. She is frustrated and depressed by the so called ritual which damaged her selfhood, womanhood and an identity. She is so much repressed that she is ready to accept the death rather than the life: “There is nothing more of this life I need to see. What I have already experienced is more than enough. Besides ... soberly, maybe death is easier than life, as pregnancy is easier than birth” (253).

Tashi survives the extreme form of the violence and abuse. The protagonist confronts the violation and exploitation from the very beginning of her life. She survives enduring the violence even her childhood friend and Adam sister’s Olivia prevent her for not to go with the ritual. The patriarchy leads to the victimization of the women in order to ensure a girl’s virginity or purity before marriage. She keeps on resisting to the society as she “resolved to kill M’Lissa” (218). To go against the procedure by taking a decision to kill M’Lissa symbolizes her resistance, bitterness toward the male dominated society. They are abused and violated. She pours her anger in this manner: “[E]ach night I fingered the razors I kept concealed in the stuffing of my pillow, fantasizing her bloody



demise I swore I would mutilate her wrinkled body so much her own God wouldn't recognize her. I smiled to think of her nose lying bloody on the bed" (208). These lines show Tashi's bitterness and anger towards the circumciser. She has imagined the death of M'Lissa in order to take her revenge and prove herself as an autonomous being. She wants to mutilate her wrinkled body so much as her own God wouldn't recognize. She is very excited to execute the job. When she has to confess in the courtroom, her plan shows the nature of resistance but she doesn't confess. Instead, she gains empowerment emotionally and spiritually:

Yes, I say to the attorney, I bought three razors.

Why three? He asks.

Because I wanted to be sure

Sure of what?

To do the job properly

You mean to kill the old woman?

Yes. (36)

The above conversation between attorney and Tashi shows that she wanted to do the job properly. Job of murdering M'Lissa. She never wished to leave behind M'Lissa alive. So, she bought three razors to be sure for to do the job properly. Similarly, during the confession, in response to judge question, how she did it, she describes:

How did you do it, Mrs. Johnson?

Asked the judge nearest to me.

That, I said, is none of your damn business but do you think my confession

Stopped the trial? No, it did not. For days afterward they were still talking

About finding my razors in the ashes of M'Lissa's house, and speculating

on

The gory ways. I chose to mutilate and dispose of her. Their imaginations, I found, were even sicker than my own. (268)

Tashi has got support and help from her friends and family at her execution by firing squad on the soccer field. She released from her tortured soul for “killing someone who many years ago, killed me” (274). Adam, Olivia, Benny, Pierre, Raye and Mbatl hold a banner “RESISTANCE IS THE SECRET OF OY” (281). Tashi’s joy in celebrating her resistance is marked in her refusal to be blindfolded during the moment of execution for she wants to look at the sky, the symbol of freedom, to capture that as eternity. After death, Tashi’s divided selves unite into her whole self; Tashi has resisted to the evil in order to get freedom and selfhood. So the secret of joy and survival is resistance.

Through the novel, Walker discusses the dark and painful subject matter of female genital mutilation, the inhuman and misogynistic practice that occurs all over the African countries. The writer’s main aim is to help eradicate the tradition from the society by educating the women all over the world. At the end of the novel, Walker writes a letter to the reader. In it, she continues to appeal to the reader by giving further educating them on the reality of the victims of this practice:

“[I]t is estimated that from ninety to one hundred million women and girls living today in Africans, far eastern and middle eastern countries have suffered some form of genital mutilation. Recent articles in the media have reported on the growing practice of “female circumcision” in the United States and Europe, among immigrants from countries where it is part of the culture” (283).

She gives an extensive list of books with the hope that women will continue to educate themselves on the subject. This continuous education would no doubt inspire other

women to join their hands in the battle to end this victimization of women. Further establishing her resolve, Walker declares that “a portion of the royalties from this book will be used to educate women and girls, men and boys, about the hazardous effects of genital mutilation, not simply on the health and happiness of individuals but on the whole society in which it is practiced, and the world” (285).

So, we can see that through the novel educational process will begin at the end of the novel. The prominent character, Tashi, is used as a powerful weapon in the war against the so called ritual of genital mutilation. After murdering M'Lissa, representative of patriarchal society, she shows resistance to the male dominated society which is really hard for such a poor, uneducated woman. Finally, Tashi gets freedom, selfhood, redemption and the self empowerment. She gains self recognition by hard struggle. Her courage to resist women's oppression and dominance is clearly illustrated in the novel. She becomes confident woman by gaining her identity.

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