



Research Article



Check for updates

Section: Literary Criticism



This article is published by Royallite Global, Kenya in the *Journal of Postcolonial Writing and World Literatures*, Volume 2, Issue 1, 2021

**Article Information**

Submitted: 21st Aug 2020
Accepted: 24th Jan 2021
Published: 27th Feb 2021

Additional information is available at the end of the article

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

To read the paper online, please scan this QR code



The community and the self: Patriarchy, female genital mutilation, and the quest for identity in Alice Walker's *Possessing the Secret of Joy* and Osman Conteh's *Unanswered Cries*

Francis Tiambei

Department of English and Cultural Studies, University of Buea, Cameroon

Email: fortimuahfrancis@yahoo.com

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2704-5949>

Abstract

Female genital mutilation is a major controversial issue which has generated and continues to generate oftentimes acrimonious debates within feminist literary and anthropological cycles. This paper joins the ever-vibrant conversation on the issue of female identity in a conservative patriarchal setup. It examines female genital mutilation and the quest for identity in Alice Walker's *Possessing the Secret of Joy* and Osman Conteh's *Unanswered Cries* from a feminist perspective. It shows that the two authors see female genital mutilation (FGM) as the most glaring manifestation of patriarchy's objectification and oppression of women. The two authors see patriarchy as a monolithic system which forces these communities to abide by its precepts. As such Tashi's action in *Possessing the Secret of Joy* and Olabisi's in *Unanswered Cries* are nothing short of revolutionary. Their rebellion against social conformism exemplified by the practice of FGM, and their option for freedom and self-determination can be seen as a quest for an individual identity in communities where individual identities have all been subsumed into one collective identity. By fighting against an obnoxious, but common practice like FGM, Tashi and Olabisi have become the torchbearers of the feminist fight for freedom and identity.

Keywords: community, female genital mutilation, identity, patriarchy, self

How to Cite:

Tiambei, F. (2021). The community and the self: Patriarchy, female Genital Mutilation, and the quest for Identity in Alice Walker's *Possessing the Secret of Joy* and Osman Conteh's *Unanswered Cries*. *Journal of Postcolonial Writing and World Literatures*, 2(1). Retrieved from <https://royalliteglobal.com/world-literatures/article/view/517>



© 2021 The Author(s). This open access article is distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution (CC-BY-NC-SA) license.

Introduction

The issue of female genital mutilation (FGM) has been generating a lot of acrimonious debates both within and outside feminist circles for decades now. It has generated a lot of passionate writings both in the domain of literature and anthropology. We all know that writers do not write ex nihilo; they are influenced by their socio-economic and political environment. Literature, as Alan Swingewood (1971) writes, is “pre-eminently concerned with man’s social world, his adaptation to it, and his desire to change it” (p. 12). This means that literature plays a dual function: it is both an artistic and a social artifact. Alice Walker falls in line with this aspect of literary productivity. In *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1993), she sets out on a crusade against the age-old practice of FGM. Osman Conteh too is a relatively young writer who has decided to tackle FGM in his work *Unanswered Cries* (2002).

This study aims to show how resistance against patriarchy and female genital mutilation constitutes a quest for identity in Alice Walker’s *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1993) and Osman Conteh’s *Unanswered Cries* (2001). The protagonists of the two novels live in communities where individual identities are relegated to the background, and where there exists only a collective identity. As such, to go against what is seen as their way of life is an act of rebellion with great ramifications and dire consequences.

To better carry out this study we opted for feminist criticism as our guiding compass. Our choice of this approach was guided by the fact that the question of FGM is central to the feminist quest for freedom and identity. Feminist literary criticism is a political attack upon other forms of criticism and theory, and because of its social orientation it moves beyond traditional literary criticism. In its diverse manifestations feminism is concerned with difference and the marginalization of women both within and outside the literary canon. Feminists believe that contemporary cultures are organised in favour of the interests of men.

A lot has been written on the question of female genital mutilation. In Africa one of the greatest critiques of female genital mutilation is the Senegalese-born Awa Thiam. She says: “Women, there is a common denominator in our lives: phallogocratic violence” (Thiam, 1978, p.124). She considers patriarchy as woman’s greatest oppressor, and sees female genital mutilation as the foremost form of the physical implementation of subservience to a dominant patriarchy. However, Awa Thiam (1978) does not only indict men for the negative effects of patriarchy; she is also very critical of women for perpetuating male dominance by continuously submitting their daughters to harmful practices like FGM. She says “the majority of them perform the same operations on their daughters, even though they are aware of the evils that can ensue, ... they do it to avoid dissociating themselves from others; because, in their society or ethnic group it has to be done” (p. 84). Thiam therefore indicts women for persecuting one another in order to accommodate patriarchy. She writes: “it would seem that males have forced women to become their own torturers, to butcher each other. This would partly explain the fact that women themselves take responsibility for their own mutilation” ; adding that in such communities non-excised women are despised; and she sees this hatred as “proof of the pressure ... that men have exercised over women” (p. 75). She feels that to end this cultural objectification, women must stop condoning such practices in the name of the preservation of some Pan-Africanist traditions and resistance to neo-colonialism and Westernization. She writes that we must refute the claim that the preservation of those customs today is our way of resisting the ever-increasing power of neo-colonialism or imperialism. Such a justification gives false validation to harmful cultural practices that should be eradicated (p.126). Cultural independence is an essential aspect of the African identity, but it cannot be used as an excuse to uphold harmful practices like FGM. She prescribes defiance as the solution; “there is a choice. We can rebel and fight...” (Thiam, 1978, p. 77).

Alice Walker, Patriarchy, and Female Genital Mutilation in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*

Alice Walker is a household name in world literature today. She is known for her radical, and sometimes, controversial stance on many socio-political issues. In *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1993), she tackles one of the most controversial, and passionate issues to be tackled by her yet – the issue of FGM. Alice Walker herself once said “This novel was quite horrific to write, and I knew that writing it would change me profoundly ...” (Menkim, 1997, p. 76).

Walker considers patriarchy and its accompanying bedfellow – sexism – as the brains behind this horrendous practice. The Olinka society which Alice Walker paints in *Possessing the Secret of Joy* is a patriarchal one. Everything is done for the good and pleasure of the man. At the beginning of the novel, the protagonist (Tashi) is a lively and happy girl. She discovers sexual pleasure in the arms of Adam, her boyfriend. Their sexual life is hot and free. They do not hesitate to violate all tribal taboos. They have sex in the bushes of their village. This type of sexual intercourse is a major taboo amongst the Olinkans. Unlike most women in her culture, Tashi experiences sexual pleasure before her initiation. She experiences orgasm and practises masturbation and oral sex – both taboos in her culture. Adam, son of the village missionary, and her lover and eventual husband says “my tongue brought us no babies, and to both of us delight, ... this way of loving, among her people, the greatest taboo of all” (p. 28). This shows the level of freedom that Tashi enjoyed before her circumcision; a freedom marked by her constant transgression of societal taboos.

Superstition is very strong in this community; the people strongly believe that making love in the fields would lead to failed yields. Adam says the village considers this a sacrilege: “the strongest taboo, ... no one in living memory had broken it, ... it was declared if there was any fornication whatsoever in the fields the crops would not grow”. No one ever saw them, and “the fields produced their harvests as before” (p. 27).

Tashi is the epitome of happiness and joie de vivre. But cultural and socio-political propaganda pushes her to accept to undergo the ordeal of FGM. Adam says that “she was like a fleshy, succulent fruit; and when I was not with her, I dreamed of the time I would next lie on my belly between her legs, my cheeks caressed by the gentle rhythms of her thighs” (P. 28). However, in this society individual happiness or identity is subsumed in the group’s identity. Tashi finally gives in to social, cultural, and Pan-Africanist propaganda about purity, cultural authenticity, and fight against Western cultural imperialism. In the midst of all this propaganda she forgoes her love and happiness and opts to be circumcised in order to fit in with the cultural aspirations of her people. She sloughs her individuality and takes on what her tribe prescribes. She takes the fatal decision to undergo the ritual. When her friend Olivia tries to persuade her against undergoing the ritual, she reacts violently, and yells at her:

Who are you and your people never to accept us as we are? Never to imitate any of our ways? It was always we who have to change. I spat on the ground. It was an expression of contempt only very old Olinkans had known how to use to full effect [...] I turned my back on the sister of my heart, and rushed away from her stricken face. (pp. 23-24).

The above statement shows that Tashi has imbibed the all-pervasive propaganda about Pan-Africanism and cultural authenticity. That is why she reacts so violently against Olivia’s attempt to persuade her not to undergo the rite. She sacrifices personal happiness and true friendship for tribal solidarity. The irony here is that she thinks she is acting in defiance when in reality she is succumbing to patriarchal dominance.

Raye, Tashi’s American psychologist asks her why she “willingly gave this (sexual pleasure)

up". Tashi's answer is really telling of her desire for acceptance as well as her imbibing the cultural purity narrative of her people. She answers that she wanted "to be accepted as a real woman by the Olinka people; to stop the jeering. Otherwise, I was a thing. Worse, because of my friendship with Adam's family and my special relationship with him, I was never trusted, considered a potential traitor, even" (p. 120).

Tashi has been socialised into believing in the theory of cultural purity and resistance against cultural imperialism which is manifested in the village by the presence of the Christian missionaries (e.g. Adam). Even her own mother has been converted to Christianity which is seen as a foreign culture and a threat to Olinka cultural heritage. The fight for cultural authenticity and the rhetoric of purity is symbolised by the Leader. The Leader is venerated for standing up to imperialism. He is jailed, and finally dies for his people's dignity. He calls on the Olinka people to maintain their cultural heritage. Tashi sees this as a direct call to maintain FGM: "our Leader had died for us,... for our freedom. What could I possibly say about my insignificant life in the face of that reality" (p.144). Tashi has been completely brainwashed by this discourse of cultural purity and authenticity. She feels that she must follow the instructions of the leader to uphold Olinka tradition and preserve their cultural uniqueness. She tells Raye, her psychiatrist:

Even from prison we received our instructions,... from our Leader. That we must remember who we are. That we must fight the white oppressors without ceasing [...] That we must retain the purity of our culture and traditions. That we must not neglect our ancient customs,... We must keep ourselves clean and pure as we had since time immemorial - by cutting out unclean parts of our bodies. (pp. 115-119)

The above statement is full of instructions and orders. In this patriarchal social order no woman dares to question such injunctions. Tashi is carried away by this narrative of cultural purity. The leader of the tribe is the "greatest liberator" of the Olinka people; he is the head of the dominant patriarchy. It is the aspiration of every Olinka girl to gain the acceptance of the Leader and village elders, but this acceptance can only be got if one is circumcised (p.120). Tashi, like any other Olinka girl, chooses to accommodate this reality as she makes the choice to be circumcised. However, beneath this cultural purity rhetoric is the patriarchal quest for the control of the female body. As Hanny Lightfoot-Klein (1998) says, women are "assumed to be (by nature) sexually voracious, promiscuous, and unbridled creatures, (and) morally weak" (p.13). If left unbridled they grow wild and become uncontrollable. It is this attempt to control female sexuality that the patriarchal order opts for female genital mutilation. As such, no voice is raised to challenge the essence of FGM. There is a conspiracy of silence as no one musters the courage to stand up and say "No" to it. The practice itself is shrouded in secret, and young girls are not only encouraged not to cry, but are also made to vow not to reveal the secret of circumcision. Even with the death of Dura (Tashi's elder sister) as a result of FGM, no one talks about it. They even ask Tashi not to weep. It is this conspiracy of silence that is the bedrock of such a social order. Tashi remarks:

They were always saying you mustn't cry... Yes, we understand your sister is dead, but time now to put on a good face ... How could I believe these were the same people I'd known all my life? The same people who'd known Dura? And whom Dura had known. She'd gone to buy matches or snuff for them every day. She'd carried their water jugs on her head, ... suddenly it was not

acceptable to speak of my sister. Or to cry for her. (p. 15)

The above statement shows that the question of FGM has become a no-go area in this community. No one dares to challenge it; as such, tragedies like the one that befalls Dura go unnoticed. Jomo Kenyatta (1978) adds that "they (women) are made to promise never to reveal the tribal secrets, even to members of the tribe who have not been initiated" (p. 141). In this community where male domination is complete, the female members of the society remain silent. Even in excruciating pain they struggle to put on a straightface. Tashi remembers her mother's dogged will to endure the status quo. She does not weep at the death of her daughter, Dura. Tashi says: "But my mother never wept, though like the rest of the women, when called upon to salute the power of the chief and his counsellors she could let out a cry that assaulted the very heavens without its praising pain" (p. 57).

We see then that patriarchy has a strong grip on this society. No matter the pain, no woman rises to challenge the system. Such a move would be tantamount to destroying the entire community, and the defaulter would face ostracism. Adam, an outsider, appraises this conspiracy of silence which is the logical result of patriarchy's complete domination of this society. He states that "They do not want to hear what their children suffer. They've made the telling of the suffering itself a taboo" (p. 161).

Geraldine Brooks (1995) says patriarchy cultivates a culture where the honour of the family is measured by the "virtue and chastity of its women" (37). As such "the physical suppression of a woman's desire in order to preserve her purity is seemingly an almost natural step", and this leads to the attempt to "lessen or destroy sexual pleasure and as such lessen temptation (p. 37). Women must display extreme modesty, unassailable chastity and a virtual withdrawal from the world outside the home.

When Tashi decides to rebel against this system, she reproaches M'Lissa (the *tsunga* or traditional circumciser) for being the tool of the all-pervasive patriarchal system for the suppression and subjugation of the woman. Tashi tells her:

You taught them this ... The uncircumcised woman is loose like shoe that all, no matter their size, might wear. This is unseemly [...] unclean. A proper woman must be cut and sewn to fit only her husband, whose pleasure depends on an opening it might take months, even years, to enlarge. Men love and enjoy the struggle. (pp. 216-17)

The above statement shows that Tashi has arrived at self-realisation. She begins to question all those values that she was made to see as the cornerstone of Olinka identity. She is beginning to build up an identity for herself against this patriarchal social order which makes women seek societal acceptance above all else. The desire to be accepted and considered a woman in this society, to be deemed honourable, pushes women to opt for circumcision without protest – instead they look towards it with great anticipation. If a girl fails to undergo this process, she and her family are stigmatised and ostracised.

According to Elfrat Tsaelon (1997), "Stigma refers to a phenomenon where a person bears a mark or sign of deviance (physical, psychological or social) by departing noticeably from norms of appearance or behaviour" (p. 85). This patriarchal social order is characterised by the desire by the male Self to dominate the female Other completely. M'Lissa is not really the villain as in traditional fiction. She is rather the pathetic custodian of an obnoxious tradition. She is not more than a pawn on the socio-cultural chessboard of Olinkan cosmology.

George Olakunle (2001) compares this old woman to the archetypal Scheherazade of

the Arabian Nights. He writes that she, for days, stays her murderer's hand by telling stories. The text's recourse to the Scheherazade motif thus establishes a commonality of experience and identity between M'Lissa and Tashi. And since both women are inventions in the service of Walker's story-telling, the latter herself becomes the original Scheherazade (pp. 359-60). M'Lissa herself is a victim of patriarchy. Though she appears to be the poster girl of FGM, she is in reality just an instrument of patriarchal dominance.

Yesterday M'Lissa was a victim; today she contributes to perpetuate that same heinous tradition that victimized her when she was a child. When she was about to be circumcised her mother tried to shield her and spare her some of the pain, but the male witch doctor had taken over and "showed no mercy" (p. 214). Since then M'Lissa has never been the same again. She says that "I could never again see myself, for the child that finally rose from the mat three months later, and dragged herself out of the initiation hut and finally home, was not the child who had been taken there. I was never to see that child again" (p. 215). This shows that she too is a victim of the system.

Alice Walker shows that the Olinka women are guilty of perpetuating the silence governing circumcision rites, thereby allowing it to flourish. Tashi's sister (Dura) and the other young girls of the community look forward to these rites because prior to such rites they receive a lot of presents from their parents. Tashi remembers how Dura was very excited during the days leading up to the initiation that would cost her her life. For "Suddenly they had become the centre of everyone's attention; every day there were gifts (p. 9). These gifts and preferential treatment foster excitement amongst the young girls who do not know what awaits them. These children do not know that they are like lambs being taken to the slaughter. In *Warrior Marks* (1996) Alice Walker interviews a circumciser who notes that "everything is a secret, and 'even if you put a knife' to the girls who have been circumcised, they wouldn't talk and tell you what is cut and how it is done" (p.182). The women's fear to speak out enables patriarchal societies to perpetuate the ignorance that fosters female subjugation. This social order has prevented women from imagining an alternative lifestyle for their daughters. Even the *Tsonga* herself knows the pains she is inflicting on the young girls. But she knows that hers is a divine duty to maintain her people's secular tradition. She says: "I have been strong in the service of tradition, to what makes us a people. In service to the country and what makes us who we are. But who are we but torturers of children?" (p. 219). As such, M'Lissa is honoured after the liberation wars for the wonderful role she has played as the custodian of tradition in the face of rampaging colonialism. She is honoured for "her unflinching adherence to the ancient customs and traditions of the Olinkan state" (p. 147).

Fran Hosken (1993) wonders why women are singled out as the keepers of tradition. She writes that "Tradition is stressed when it comes to keeping women 'in their place' - in Africa and all over the world - that is, without education or resources, dependent, ignorant, illiterate, and isolated" (p. 10). This is the situation in *Possessing the Secret of Joy* where the narrative of tradition and cultural purity is used to maintain the practice of FGM. In such systems women are looked upon as the properties of men. They are made for man's satisfaction. Anyone who goes against this social order is treated as plague and must be eliminated. As such, there is a great desire to live in conformity with the rest of the community, and there is a morbid fear of being stigmatised and considered an outcast.

Tashi tells Raye: "...certainly to all my friends who'd been circumcised, my uncircumcised vagina was thought of as a monstrosity. They laughed at me. Jeered at me for having a tail" (P. 120). Since conformity is the driving force of the community, Tashi decides to undergo the rite. She is uneducated about the risks and pains involved in FGM, and desires to undergo the circumcision so that she would be deemed a suitable Olinka

maiden. No one forces Tashi to undergo the procedure at an early age like her elder sister because her mother, under missionary influence, converts to Christianity. It is therefore of her own volition that she chooses to undergo the circumcision rite. According to M'Lissa, most of the girls are initiated after birth or at the age of five or six, but certainly by the onset of puberty – ten or eleven. She had reprimanded Catherine (Tashi's mother) for her refusal to have Tashi undergo the operation when she had reached the right age. But because Catherine "had gone Christian, she'd turned a deaf ear to her" (p. 63). M'Lissa herself is surprised when Tashi in her adult age comes up to her and opts to undergo the operation. She does this because in this society there is no individual identity; you are one with the community or you are an outcast. M'Lissa justifies her act by saying that "it was the grownup daughter who had come to her, wanting the operation because she recognised it as the only remaining definitive stamp of Olinka tradition" (p. 63).

Alice Walker, FGM, and the North/South Divide

Most African feminists and even some Western feminist critics accuse Alice Walker of cultural imperialism. They think that Alice Walker has subconsciously fallen prey to the Western rhetoric of cultural superiority vis-à-vis its African counterpart by making Tashi free only in the Western world. Linda Strong-Leek (2009) says "Alice Walker's *Possessing the Secret of Joy* was written with an explicit political purpose: to end female genital mutilation" (p. 116). But Walker asserts that she wrote the novel "as a duty to my conscience ... to write a book such as this, about a subject such as female genital mutilation, is in fact, ... the reason for my education" (p. 147). But Strong-Leek, like most feminist critics, sees Alice Walker as a Westerner interpreting a people's culture through her Western lens, and thereby blames her for falling prey to cultural imperialism. They hold that the depiction of Africa and Africans in the novel "is beholden to her Western hegemonic heritage as an American rather than the African she claims in the novel" (Nontsasa, 2001, p. 33). But Alice Walker challenges this way of looking at the issue. She says that "The fear of being labelled cultural imperialists and racists has made many reluctant to say or do anything about female genital mutilation ... There has been a deafening silence, the refusal to engage either critically or actively with this taboo area of feminist concern" (Walker, 1996, p. 94). This shows the difficulty involved in treating such a passionate issue. By breaking the taboo surrounding FGM, Walker challenges her readers "to feel with the people who are immersed in the suffering" (Walker, 1993, p. ix).

But in spite of her spirited defence of her treatment of the issue, Alice Walker suffered ostracism and lots of condemnations for her treatment of the matter. Linda Strong-Leek (1993) says Walker's position is rather controversial because she is unwilling to participate in a conversation that articulates, in any manner, the cultural importance of the "circumcision ritual and the initiation ceremonies that it often accompanies ... Walker presents the circumcision ritual in monolithic terms" (p. 155). To her, it is not the place of "Western feminists to continue to decide the fates of peoples in other cultures" (p. 160). She says that before self-appointing themselves the liberators of African women from the pangs of the barbaric traditions in which they are trapped, they should first liberate their own selves (p. 160).

One sees that the issue of FGM is always controversial and needs a lot of courage to tackle especially for someone considered as a Westerner even if black as Alice Walker. And Alice Walker is not lacking in this much needed courage. The physical and psychological traumas that Tashi suffers are really untellable. The operation is a failure, and she is maimed forever. The narrator notes:

It now took a quarter of an hour for her to pee. Her menstrual periods lasted ten days. She was incapacitated by cramps nearly half the month. There were premenstrual cramps: cramps caused by the near impossibility of flow passing through so tiny an aperture M'Lissa had left, after fastening together the raw sides of Tashi's vagina with a couple of thorns and inserting a straw so that, in healing, the traumatized flesh might not grow, shutting the opening completely; cramps caused by residual flow that ... had nowhere to go. There was the odor, too, of soured blood which no amount of scrubbing ... ever washed off. (p. 65)

This is rather horrible and disgusting. Tashi's old proud self is gone forever. In her desire to be accepted by her community Tashi opts for an operation that destroys her forever. She is a victim of a social order that has forced her to reject her happiness in exchange for social acceptance. She thought the operation was going to unite her with her people, but instead, she is irreparably maimed. She had thought the operation was going to unite her with the other women of the community whom she saw as strong and invincible, but she lost herself in the process. She admires the other women on the journey to the camp because they "seemed terribly bold, terribly revolutionary and free". Unfortunately after the operation when M'Lissa tells her that she might sit up and walk a few steps she notices "her own proud walk had become a shuffle" (pp. 64-65). After the circumcision it is practically impossible for a man to penetrate her since the infibulation drastically reduces her vaginal orifice. Adam, her boyfriend, unsuccessfully attempts to penetrate her for over three months. Each time Adam tries to penetrate her, she bleeds. She herself says that there was nothing he could do to her that did not hurt; but still somehow she became pregnant. This experience is so traumatizing that Tashi does not want to ever live it again. As such, when she gets pregnant a second time she decides to abort the foetus. She is not able to show motherly love to her son. She wonders how she even became pregnant in the first place. The obstetrician is forced to practise a caesarean operation on her. She never allows any bond to develop between her and her son. She even wonders how Benny never forgets that she is his mother. Tashi, like all the other Olinka maidens, has no individual identity. Her identity is completely subsumed into the collective identity of the Olinka people. She experiences a complete lack of selfhood. It is this lack of selfhood that leads her to M'Lissa, the circumciser, so that she can gain the acceptance of the Olinka tribe.

Before her circumcision Tashi is seen as the Other by her own community. This position of Otherness is compounded by her relationship with Adam and his family. Paradoxically, after Tashi's circumcision she is even more estranged from the community for whose sake she had decided to undergo the operation in the first place. In her attempt to be one with her community, she loses her own self and moves around now like a tormented soul in the wilderness. However, her attempt at self-realisation instead takes her to America. In America, she hopes to find freedom and self-realisation, but what she finds is disillusionment. In America she is also seen as the Other; some look at her as if she were a mythological creature from their deepest dreams. Tashi herself says:

I could not bear the thought of the quick-stepping American nurses looking at me as if I were a creature from beyond their imaginings. In the end, though, I was that creature. For even as I gave birth, a crowd of nurses, curious hospital staff and medical students gathered around my bed. For days afterward, doctors and nurses from around the city and, for all I know, around the state came to peer over the shoulder of my doctor as he examined me. (p. 59)

We see that Tashi is like goldfish, and like goldfish, she has no hiding place. In Africa, she is treated as the Other. She is not accepted by the Olinka tribe because she is not circumcised. She therefore rejects her own identity and opts for circumcision in order to fit in the Olinka community. Unfortunately the operation is a failure, and Tashi realises that a grievous harm has been done to her body. She then decides to leave Olinka for America in search of freedom and a new identity, but she finds only discrimination and disillusionment. She wonders who she is – an African, an Olinkan, or just a Negro. She says “I felt negated by the realization that even my psychiatrist could not see I was African” (p. 18). Not able to find a place for herself in America, Tashi flies back to Africa to confront and kill M’Lissa, her circumciser. This act is very symbolic because Tashi feels that she had lost herself the day she decided to undergo the circumcision. In killing M’Lissa, Tashi is dealing a blow against this tradition that suppresses and objectifies women. She feels no remorse after killing the hapless M’Lissa who herself is nothing but a pawn on the patriarchal chessboard of the Olinka tribe. Tashi says “I placed a pillow over her face and lay across it for an hour. Her sad stories about her life caused me to lose my taste for slashing her” (p. 276).

Before this highly symbolic act, Tashi wonders how she had entrusted her body to “this mad woman” (p. 156). This is a moment of self-realisation. At this moment Tashi is thinking as an individual with an independent identity. In her tribulations she finally finds herself. This quest for Self is seen in Alice Walker’s use of nomenclature. Tashi is born of the Olinka tribe in Africa. After undergoing circumcision, she is so psychologically traumatised that she finds it difficult to fit in this community. She then leaves for America. In America, she is called Evelyne. Later, her identity evolves to Tashi-Evelyne, and later Mrs Johnson. All these identities are interwoven at the end of the novel in her final portrayal. This shifting identity takes us back to W. E. B. DuBois’ double consciousness preachments. When in Africa, she is just called Tashi. After her circumcision and later migration to the United States she develops an ambiguous, half African and half Americanised identity. The attainment of this hybrid identity does not bring her the happiness she longs for because she is still seen as the Other. In the end she completely drops her African identity and is just called Evelyne. It is in America that Tashi develops an individual identity. She moves away from the collective identity of the Olinka tribe which pushes her into the arms of M’Lissa. She realises that the operation had completely destroyed her as an individual. This self-realisation brings Tashi to terms with the havoc that the operation did to her. She kills M’Lissa. She then is arrested and condemned to death. When she is about to face the death penalty, she writes to Lysette who is also dead and tells her “Tomorrow I will face the firing squad for killing someone who, many years ago, killed me” (p. 274). One wonders why Tashi channels her anger towards M’Lissa. She seems to forget that she went up to M’Lissa of her own volition. But her killing of M’Lissa is a political statement against the patriarchal order. In killing M’Lissa, she is dealing a blow against the system that makes her (M’Lissa) a cornerstone of Olinka identity. As such, Tashi dies satisfied and happy. She says “There is a roar as if the world cracked open and I flew inside. I am no more. And satisfied” (p.110). Her death is a kind of liberation. It also represents a final reunion with her true self.

Alice Walker takes a radical position vis-à-vis the issue of FGM. She is in line with Alan Swingewood (1971) who writes that “Literature, because it delineates man’s anxieties, hopes, and aspirations, is perhaps one of the most creative barometers of the human responses to social forces” (p. 17). Though Tashi’s quest for Self ends in death, it is not a failure. Her death is a political statement which raises her to the status of martyr in the fight for female liberation in her community. George Olakunle (2001) commends Alice Walker for herst and on a serious issue like female genital mutilation. He writes: “Walker shows that [...] the work

of fiction is not an escape from the world, but an intense self-immersion into that world" (p. 371).

Before her death, Tashi asks M'Bati what the secret of possessing joy is, and M'Bati tells her "We are women. We must find out" (p. 269). Tashi discovers before her death that the secret to possessing joy lies in sustaining one's identity. This identity is achieved through rebellion and resistance against the demands of a dominant patriarchy.

When Men Make a Difference: FGM in Osman Conteh's *Unanswered Cries*

In Osman Conteh's *Unanswered Cries* (2002) the situation is not very different. The ruling order is patriarchy like in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. The protagonist, Olabisi, leaves Freetown, Sierra Leone, for the village to spend the holiday with her mother. It is here that Olabisi begins to come to terms with the issue of FGM. Like in most African communities, cultural beliefs are the driving force of the society. The narrator states: "On the day the gods wanted her circumcised, Olabisi was sitting, restless, on a low stool, washing dishes in a large, plastic bowl" (p. 5).

One of the strategies used to submit a people is to make use of their cultural beliefs and religion. Here, the author talks of the day the "gods wanted Olabisi circumcised". In such traditional societies, it is unthinkable to go against the "wishes" of the gods. Makalay really believes in the power of tradition. As such, she thinks that the best thing that can happen to her daughter is for her to be circumcised. She first starts by trying to coax Olabisi to accept the prospect of being circumcised. She tells her that if she is circumcised, she would join the "bondo" secret society – a very powerful secret society of women that regiments life for women in the village. She tells Olabisi: "You become a member when you get circumcised" (p. 7). Makalay is the voice of tradition and obscurantism in the novel. She is the one who puts a lot of pressure on her daughter to have her circumcised. At the beginning, when she sees that Olabisi is bent on resisting this practice, she scolds her: "Foolish girl. Your father is just letting you grow wild in the city" (p. 8).

Female circumcision is a big social event in this community. The entire community is mobilised, and everyone looks forward to the great day. Like in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, the girls who undergo this rite are at times as young as six, and at times as old as twelve. People rush out of their houses to watch the girls and the "bondo" women. Each girl is half naked, with just a piece of cloth tied under her armpits and "Their hands, feet and faces were painted with white clay" (9). These young girls dance barefooted on the stony road. In this culture, one is respected when they are able to dominate pain. When these girls go through the ordeal of circumcision, they are now considered as women and treated with great respect. Olabisi admits that these girls are really courageous to dance barefooted on such stony ground. Were she to do that, her feet would bleed and she would not be able to wear shoes for days. The narrator writes: "Yet these girls, including the six-year-old, were stamping the earth without flinching. They can handle pain, Olabisi admitted with grudging respect" (p. 9).

Like in *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1993), there is great social pressure on girls to get circumcised. Any young girl, who does not undergo this rite, brings dishonour upon herself and family. Most often the greatest enforcers of this tradition are women themselves. This is the case in *Unanswered Cries* where Makalay puts great pressure on her daughter to have her circumcised. She never hesitates to insult her: "You are a gboroka. Uncircumcised. That is what you are" (P. 11). She tells her that the young, half naked girls dancing on the street are no longer girls, but are now respectable women. As such, she admonishes Olabisi to talk of them with respect. Makalay treats her own daughter poorly in order to pressurise her into undergoing the circumcision ritual. She makes Olabisi understand that an uncircumcised

girl is a second-class person in this society. She even forbids Olabisi from going near the circumcised girls; "If you ever try to go near them again, I will beat you until your skin peels. Do you understand me?" (p.11). Makalay's attitude is dictated by fear of the social stigma that goes with having an uncircumcised daughter. At the base of this social pressure is the patriarchal social order that subjects women to the position of man's plaything. But contrary to her mother, Olabisi is a self-opinionated girl who wants to maintain her own identity, and not adopt an identity decided for her by the community. She does not want her mother or the community to dictate to her. In this society the place of the woman is in the kitchen, and her greatest goal in life is to get married and bear children for her husband. For this goal to be achieved a girl must be circumcised because this practice is the norm; and to challenge it would be tantamount to trying to pull down the social edifice. The marriage card is the trump card in this community, but Makalay uses it to no avail. She tells Olabisi: "If you don't get circumcised, no one in this village will ever respect you. No man will ever want to marry you. The riff-raff boys will get after you for sexual fun, like dogs. But if you get circumcised, none of these ugly things will happen to you" (p. 12).

In this community, to please and satisfy man is any woman's greatest responsibility and aspiration in life. But ironically, it is the men who seem to represent the voice of progressivism in this community. The women represent the voice of tradition and obscurantism. In this light, Olabisi tells her mother that if she is circumcised her father would be angry. But Makalay retorts "Your father will never know, until you tell him" (p. 13). When Makalay realises that her rather abrasive style has failed to yield fruits, she then opts for cajolery and flattery. She tells Olabisi: "Think of the glory Olabisi. You will be taught how to be a real woman, how to cook a real meal that would make your husband leak his fingers, like a child,...you will be taught how to be a good housewife,...and how to be a wonderful mother to your children" (p. 14).

One sees here that the patriarchal social order has eaten deep into the very fabric of women's reasoning and worldview. Everything is done to satisfy the man. But, Olabisi does not want to join everyone on the circumcision bandwagon. She opts to be herself, and not to give up her identity for fear of ostracism. Makalay, though an educated woman, is the voice of tradition in the novel. After failing to convince Olabisi that circumcision would make her a good wife and a better mother, she now makes her eye the material aspect of things. She tells her: "Think of the passing out ceremony, graduation day. You will be dressed in the most beautiful clothes ever, with gold earrings, gold trinkets and all types of jewellery" (p.13). But Olabisi is not fooled by all these promises. To her mother's promises she offers a very pertinent and mind-boggling answer: "But mama, if you love me so much, you can still dress me in that way" (13). But Makalay instead resorts to blackmail, telling her daughter that she would never offer her such things unless she accepts to undergo the operation.

Olabisi wonders about the foundation of all these pressures and acrimony. She does not see why a young girl like herself cannot be allowed to live her life the way she sees fit. She does not see any difference between herself and circumcised girls like Rugiatu and Salay. She asks these two girls who a "gborka" is. Her use of this taboo word provokes a violent reaction from the two girls. They attack her, and she fights them back like a wounded lion. She realises that no girl in the village wants to be her friend because she is a "gborka". In the course of the fight Olabisi strips the girls naked. This is an abomination because a "gborka" has seen the vagina of a circumcised girl. Olabisi has to pay for her effrontery by being circumcised willingly or, if need be, by force.

To make things worse, the two girls happen to be the daughters of Yah Posseh, the leader of the "bondo" secret society. She wields a lot of power in this society because it is

believed that she communicates directly with the bondo gods. By stripping the girls, Olabisi has broken the law of the bondo gods. Nobody listens to Olabisi when she says that the girls started the fight. Her own mother retorts angrily: "You did worse,... you stupid girl. You stripped two bondo girls naked and looked at their private parts. You! A gborka" (p. 19). She adds: "You are a gborka, a stupid uncircumcised girl. How many times do I have to explain it to you? They can look at you naked, but you should never so much as glance at their nakedness!" (p.19). The above statement shows the degree of pressure that is brought to bear on young girls in this community to force them to submit themselves to the ritual. Olabisi wonders what makes her different from these circumcised girls. No matter what it is, she is bent on being herself, and not what people want her to be. She decides to stand up against this social order. Since her mother and the bondo women want to have her circumcised by force, she runs away from home. She goes to hide in the forest. While in the forest she discovers the camp where FGM is practised on young girls. She sees one little six-year-old girl being led into the camp to be circumcised. The poor little girl is very frightened and all the coaxing words from the bondo women do nothing to allay her fears. Olabisi says that "The girl was like a fly being led to a spider's web" (p. 29). She does not know what is going to happen to her. She then brakes and runs away as fast as her legs can carry her. But unfortunately someone trips her and she falls, losing any chance of escaping. The narrator describes the scene vividly: "The shrieks of the girl were drowned. Her cries went unanswered. Her clothes and pants were torn off her body. She fought like a wild cat, kicking and punching and shrieking and scratching. Without success" (p. 29). The author then goes further to paint a rather horrible picture of this heinous practice:

Two women gripped her hands. Two others grabbed her feet and spread them wide. An elderly woman came out of the hut, holding a sharp object that glinted under the rays of the dying sun. It was a knife... The woman with the knife crouched between the legs of the girl. The girl thrashed about like a snake caught in a farm trap. The elderly woman reached her hands down to the genitals of the girl and started to cut her flesh. (p. 30)

The above quotation paints a rather gory picture of FGM. It shows the trauma that girls go through in order to be accepted by the society. There is also a great conspiracy of silence, but contrary to the situation in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, the men in *Unanswered Cries* seem to be the voices of progress, while the women are rather conservative and determined to oppose any voice that goes against FGM. This goes contrary to Fran Hosken (1993) who writes that "Africa is a region where absolute patriarchy is the rule, where women are deprived of property and land rights, where polygamy and wife abuse are the rule and where male domination is absolute both in the village as well as in national governments" (p. 69). Such a radical position is absent from *Unanswered Cries* as we see men either playing peripheral roles, or who are downright against FGM. A case in point is Ade Jones who goes to court to protect his daughter whose mother is bent on having her circumcised. Every stratagem is used to silence any dissenting voices. Since tradition and superstition are very strong in this society, they are manipulated to quell any voice that says something contrary to the dominant narrative. As such, when Olabisi runs away to avoid being genitally mutilated, a lot of pressure is brought to bear on her mother. The "Digba Sowe" (the head of the traditional surgeons who circumcise young girls) tells her "You have disobeyed the gods [...] and must be punished" (p. 31). Makalay is very frightened by this threat. She starts to have nightmares which she considers as premonitions from the spirits of what will befall her if

Olabisi is not circumcised.

We realise that the people's beliefs are manipulated to quell any objection that may arise against such a practice. As such, its proponents say they are executing the commands of the gods. Yah Posseh tells Makalay "Your daughter from the city has offended the spirits of the ancestors, the gods of our tradition. The spirits demand that she must be circumcised" (p. 22). This secret society is so powerful that it dictates to and threatens all the other female members of the society who do not bow down to its whims and caprices. She tells Makalay to bring her daughter to the "bondo" camp "this" evening for circumcision: "If you disobey, the spirits will make things difficult for you during childbirth" (p. 22). This threat frightens Makalay out of her wits. She pleads with Yah Posseh to forgive Olabisi and assures her that she will bring Olabisi as demanded.

Dr Koromo, a minor character in the novel, says "the soweys are traditionally believed to possess supernatural powers. They are feared and protected by the community in which they live. Besides, 'bondo' women, as with any other secret society, take oaths of secrecy" (p.70). In this light, tragedies that ensue from such practices are explained as resulting from witchcraft. They say "... she has seen the bondo spirit, the god of female circumcision, and did not survive the experience" (p. 70). One sees then that a dark cloud of obscurantism is hovering over the people, binding them together and preventing any attempt to go against the dictates of the society. But Olabisi is a girl of great courage. She decides to stand up to the dictates of this society. In a society where the Self is completely subsumed into the community, she opts to stand up and say "No" to FGM by refusing to be circumcised. This brings her great trouble both at home and out of it. She puts up a spirited fight against her mother's psychological and physical pressures to force her to undergo the rite. But Olabisi is impervious to all her coaxing promises and physical assaults.

In the end the villagers resort to the use of force. At this point, Olabisi runs away and hides in the forest. Here, she is cornered and arrested, but she extricates herself from the grip of the women and runs further into the forest. She is very intelligent and crafty enough to turn Pa Amadu, the hunter who is sent to fetch her, into an ally. She pays him off and asks him to show her the way to Freetown, where she hopes to find freedom. One realises that Olabisi is a girl of strong personality. She is able to stand up to the ostracism to which she is subjected because of her refusal to bow down to the dictates of social conformity. She upholds an independent identity all through; unlike Tashi in *Possessing the Secret of Joy* who succumbs to social pressures and accepts to undergo FGM before realising the gravity of the harm done to her body, and then rebelling.

Conclusion

This study set out to analyse from a feminist perspective the issue of FGM and the quest for identity in Alice Walker's *Possessing the Secret of Joy* and Osman Conteh's *Unanswered Cries*. We realised that the two novels demonstrate that FGM is a by-product of patriarchy's objectification of women and an attempt to totally control their sexuality. It shows that patriarchy has created a monolithic social order where any attempt to go against it subjects the "culprit" and her family to social anathema and ostracism. As such there is no individual identity; but just a collective identity. The two authors frown at FGM, and condemn the resounding silence that surrounds the practice. And since FGM thrives in patriarchal monolithic communities, they prescribe rebellion as a means to achieving an independent identity for women in these communities. Though *Possessing the Secret of Joy* ends in the death of Tashi the protagonist, there is still a message of hope and optimism because her death can also be seen as a rebirth of a new era for women in her community; while the court ruling at the end of *Unanswered Cries* proves that the cries of the women do not go unanswered after all.

References

- Abusharaf, R. M. (2001). Virtuous cuts: Female genital mutilation in an African ontology. *Differences: Journal of Feminist Studies*, 12(1), 112-140.
- Brooks, G. (1995). *Nine parts of desire*. Anchor Books.
- Conteh, O. (2002). *Unanswered cries*. Macmillan Education.
- Guerin, W. L. et al. (1992). *A handbook of critical approaches to literature*. (3rd ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Hosken, F. (1993). *The Hosken report: Genital and sexual mutilation of females*. Cambridge University Press.
- Kenyatta, J. (1992). *Facing mount Kenya*. Vintage Books.
- Laurenson, D. T. and Alan S. (1971). *The sociology of literature*. MacGibbon and Kee.
- Lightfoot-Klein, H. (1989a) *Prisoners of ritual: An odyssey into female genital mutilation in Africa*. Harrington Park Press.
- Lightfoot-Klein, H (1989b). The sexual experience and marital adjustment of genitally circumcised and infibulated females in the Sudan. *The Journal of Sex Research*, 26(3), 375-392.
- Menkim, H. (1997). *Alice Walker and the paradox of writing*. Yale University Press.
- Nontsasa, N. (2001). Possessing the voice of the other: African women and the crisis of representation in Alice Walker's *Possessing the secret of joy*. *Jenda: A Journal of Culture and African Women Studies*, 1(2), 136-152.
- Olakunle, G.(2001). Alice Walker's Africa: Globalisation and the province of fiction. *Comparative Literature* 53, Duke University Press, 354-372.
- Saadawi, N. E. (1993). *The hidden face of Eve: Women in the Arab world*. (Trans. Sherif Hetata). Zed Books Ltd.
- Strong-Leek, L. (2009). *Excising the spirit: A literary analysis of female circumcision*. Africa World Press.
- Thiam, A. (1978). *Black sisters speak out: Feminism and oppression in Africa*. Pluto Press.
- Tsaelon, E. (1997). *The mask of femininity*. Sage Publications.
- Walker, A. (1993). *Possessing the secret of joy*. Simon and Schuster.
- Walker, A., and Pratibha P. (1996). *Warrior marks: Female genital mutilation and the sexual blinding of women*. Harcourt Brace and Company.