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DECONSTRUCTING TRADITION AND RECONSTRUCTING THE SELF: ALICE WALKER'S *POSSESSING THE SECRET OF JOY*

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DEPARTAMENTO DE FILOLOGIA INGLESA

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Trabajo que, para la obtención del Grado de Salamanca, presenta Josefina Cornejo Parriego, dirigida por la Profesora Dr. Olga Barrios.

En la memoria de mis abuelos Alipio y Nieves.

Para mis padres.

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INTRODUCTION.

My first approach to African American women's literature was through Alice Walker, back in 1989. Up till then I was not familiar with anything that was not considered canonical literature, that is to say, a primarily White, Western and male literature. I had not heard of the so-called non canonical literatures. Reading *In Love and Trouble. Stories of Black Women*, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* and *The Color Purple*, among others, greatly impressed me. Walker's portrayals of oppressed but strong Black women affected me in such a way that I became anxious to know more about this author. Through her book of essays, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, I discovered that Walker placed herself in a literary and oral tradition established by African American women, a tradition that is still alive. When reading, for instance, Zora Neale Hurston, it can be seen the great influence exerted on Walker and on some of the most outstanding contemporary African American female writers, who consider Hurston as their foremother. This influence is strongly manifest in Walker's last work, *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, published in 1992. Her narration about a woman who bound to social conventions, undergoes the rite of female genital mutilation, had a high impact on and motivated me to explore Walker's writing more deeply.

With *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, Alice Walker asserts her commitment to perpetuate and preserve the African American literary and oral tradition she feels much indebted to. It is this connection she feels with the past that makes Walker present two traditions in her novel, storytelling and female genital mutilation, both of African origin. This simultaneous use of the two traditions is done, however, from a critical perspective, as it will be examined in the following chapters.

The First Chapter attempts to give a brief historical approach to the African American women's tradition in order to understand Walker's writing. It will show how African American women, in order to resist racist and sexist oppression, had to develop a high sense of self-reliance which supplied them with the strength needed to survive and to achieve self-identity. The desire of gaining true identity made them preserve part of their African past and heritage, their language and stories, and hand them on to the future generations. This way, a women's tradition is established, being Walker part of it.

The Second Chapter will focus on how Walker treasures the discovery of her literary ancestors, and how she obtaines a sense of continuity with the past, where she finds the sources of her own art in the above mentioned African American tradition. However, it will also show the manner in which the author questions and explores the oppressive values rooted in some African traditions, such as the rite of female circumcision, the focus of *Possessing the Secret of Joy*.

Considering that the female body is the terrain upon which the ritual is performed, the following Chapter explores how the female body becomes the site of violence, and how sexuality becomes a synonym for violence. It also analyzes the physical and emotional destruction and the woman's alienation from her body. Further, this Chapter will discuss the woman's fragmentation into different selves, and her striving for constructing the wholeness of the self. Moreover, this fragmentation stresses some of the oppositions present in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, such as Africa versus America, tradition versus modernity, love and life versus hate and death, as well as the complex relationship between individual and community. The woman needs to confront this group of oppositions in order to reach self-identity and reveal herself as a whole female.

Finally, the last Chapter will show that women cannot accept traditions blindly but question them. By doing so, they can determine what is valuable and what must be suppressed because it hinders the individual's development. Walker embraces storytelling as part of that tradition and equates the female body with her narrative. The blending of body and narrative is characterized by a non-chronological discourse and by the confluence of realism, symbolism and imagination. Only through this blending, the reconstruction of the fragmented self and the reconciliation of the mutilated body becomes possible.

I.- STRATEGIES FOR SURVIVAL: A HISTORICAL APPROACH TO AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN'S TRADITION.

The 20th century has implied a great step forward in the process of development of Black image-building in literature and other forms of art. It has also implied a worlwide recognition for Black artists. This recognition, however, has come about after a long and slow process. Black male artists, due to social barriers imposed on them, have had great difficulties when publishing their creative works. For Black female artists the act of expressing themselves through art has been even harder because of their gender. Women artists had to face up restrictions of racism, sexism and class. Acording to Barbara Christian:

> Any literature is concerned with the definitions and discovery of self in relation to the society in which one lives. But for Afro-American women, this natural desire has been powerfully oppresed, repressed, distorted by this society's restrictions. Afro-American women writers have necessarily had to confront the interaction between restrictions of racism, sexism and class that characterize our existence, whatever our individual personalities, backgrounds, talents.[1]

Scholars have concluded that the persistent and major theme throughout African American women's literature has been their attempt to generate their own literary images and find in them the necessary strategies to define and express their totality as females and Blacks.

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[1] Barbara Christian, "Creating a Universal Literature: Afro-American Women Writers", *Black Feminist Criticism. Perspectives on Black Women Writers*. (New York: Pergamon Press, 1985), p. 160.

Barbara Smith, in her essay "The Truth That Never Hurts: Black Lesbians in Fiction in The 1980s", brought out Langston Hughes' essay "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" (1926), in which he asserted:

> We younger Negro Artists who create now intend to express our individual darkskinned selves without fear or shame . . . We know we are beautiful. And ugly too . . . We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves.[2]

Although Smith's essay was concerned with Black Lesbians' literature, she mentioned Hughes' words in order to show that Black people had a strong desire to build authentic images of themselves. Langston Hughes exhorted Black people, referring to the whole community, without establishing any differences between men, women and/or homosexuals, to create new literary images of themselves, in which they could be recognized as they really were. He encouraged African American people to represent their own culture and customs as viewed by Blacks themselves, so that they could become proud of their race and their true selves.

Black authors, however, had long ago begun to affirm the validity and importance of their own portrayals in literature. The first texts written by African American authors date back to the 18th century, being Phillis Wheatley and Jupiter Hammon among the earliest ones. In the following century, poets such as George Moses Horton and James M. Whitfield, and novelists such as William

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[2] Barbara Smith. The Truth That Never Hurts Back. Black Lesbians in Fiction in the 1980s". *Third World Woman and the Politics of Feminism*. Ed. by Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Ann Russo and Lourdes Torres. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), p. 109.

Wells Brown, Frank Webb, Frances Harper and Martin Delany could be mentioned.[3] These early artists were mainly concerned with the imitation of White authors and, consequently, they did not portray the thoughts, feelings and fears of the Black community. Although the work of these early writers may be of little literary value, they were yet able to write in a society that considered literacy for a slave to be illegal, since slaveholders did not want slaves to be enlightened by the principles of individual freedom. Thus, before the 20th century there is not much record of works produced by African Americans, simply because they did not know how to read nor how to write.[4] In spite of the hardships, Black people managed to achieve an education, and, as a result, a passage to their liberation. They began to present their experiences in literary form, being the autobiography the first literary genre chosen to portray their experiences.[5] These slave narratives were the "appropriate and accurate vehicle to portray the reality of black identity".[6] It was through autobiography that African American people were able to show a new self, a new identity. By narrating their journey from bondage to freedom, from the status of slave to that of a free Black person, they portrayed a unique African American consciousness.

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[3] Houston A. Baker, Jr., *Black Literature in America*. (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1971), p. 3.

[4] This is not surprising since slavery was not abolished until 1865, after the American Civil War.

[5] Although Frederick Douglass' autobiography *Narrative of The Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* (1845) is among the best known, it is also important to mention the autobiographies of women authors, such as Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents of a Slave Girl* (1861), and Elizabeth Keckley's *Behind the Scenes* (1868).

[6] Maria del Mar Gallego Durán, " Writing as Self-Creation: Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass", *Atlantis* 1-2 (November 1994): 119.

Furthermore, their autobiographies emphasized the importance of writing as a means to overcome bondage and to acquire a true sense of self.

At the same time, slaves had to create a new culture of their own, through which they could recognize themselves as Americans with an African origin. As critic Bernard Bell states: "The historical quest of Black Americans . . . is for life, liberty, and wholeness, -the full development and unity of self and the Black community-, as a biracial, bicultural people, as Americans of African descent".[7] Thus, a new culture was created, whose power rested on the spoken word and the oral tradition, which was brought along from Africa. African Americans were committed to the preservation of their African culture, customs and traditions, within a White environment. Their search for wholeness, then, was represented by their acknowledgement of being part of two different cultures, African and American, and their need to reconcile those two aspects. Accordingly, learning to read and write, and creating their own African American culture, which was primarily oral, due to the necessity of conceiling it from the White man, was essential for their gaining freedom. Therefore, telling their own stories and preserving them out loud for the following generations, became strategies for their survival, and therefore, strategies to achieve their own identity. By retaking the African tradition of storytelling, African Americans forged a primordial motif in their literature, employed from the early authors to contemporary ones.[8]

Within the African communities, storytelling was an act of entertainment, in which the audience as well as the storyteller took part and enjoyed themselves.

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7 Bernard Bell, "The Roots of The Early Afro-American Novel", *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition*. (Amherst: The University of Massacusetts Press, 1987), p. 12.

8 Ibid., p. 25.

The storyteller's performance included not only tales, proverbs and fables but also chants, mimicry, songs and dances. Consequently, the narratives were characterized by the lyricism of speech, the musicality of rhythm, the evocative power of their past and the personification of animals and deities.[9] The audience laughed, made comments, corrected, in such a way that the folktale became a communal experience. But amusement was not the only purpose of the tales. Tales also had a didactic purpose since they constituted Africans' source of knowledge.

Passing on their myths, their fables, their tales, from generation to generation, African people had been able to establish a connection between their past and present, know their community better and face the outside world. Thus, Africans lived in a world of sound in which the spoken word had been the primary form of communication. Through the tales of the storytellers, they knew more about their past and about themselves and taught new generations how to act and how to live, providing, thus, strategies for survival. Through storytelling, African people developed a high sense of self-reliance so that they could preserve their own traditions and culture and create strong bonds. This way they gave the past a contemporaneity which contrasts with the literate societies in which knowledge comes through the written word,[10] as pointed out by an African man who said to

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[9] Chinweizy, Jemie & Madubuike, *Towards The Decolonization of African Literature* . (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1983), p. 247.

[10] Lawrence Levine and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., offer a thorough account of African oral tradition, respectively, in *Black Culture and Black Consciousness : Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), and *The Signifying Monkey. A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

two European explorers: "While you Whites have schools and books for teaching your children, we tell them stories, for our stories are our books".[11]

Storytelling, a deeply rooted tradition in Black culture, was brought along to the Americas when Africans were sold as slaves and shipped to the New World. Throughout the 19th century, most of the slave tales remained a central theme of African American expression. This tradition meant the possibility of defining their personal identity and cultural rootedness in a world which was not their own. Although African Americans were living in a White environment, and in spite of the fact that they were influenced by Euro-American plots, motifs and characters, the slaves made these their own and through them revealed much about themselves and their own culture. As Henry Louis Gates, Jr. assures: "Black people merged what they could retain from their African heritage with forms that they could appropiate from the various New World countries into which they had been flung".[12] It was this way that an African American expressive culture emerged.

In the time of slavery, for African American women, though, it was more difficult to develop a high sense of self-reliance. Devoid of their condition as human beings, they were not able to achieve a true sense of identity, so as to move forward and develop their selves. African American women could not establish a strengthened sense of their own identity and their own value, due to the harsh circumstances they had to live through during slavery. They were

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[11] Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, p. 91.

[12] Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "Introduction: Narration and Cultural Memory in the African American Tradition", Linda Goss and Marian E. Barnes (eds.), *Talk That Talk. An Anthology of African American Storytelling.* (New York: Simon & Schister Inc., 1989), p. 16.

considered as laborers, objects of sexual gratification for their White masters and slave breeders. Moreover, they were treated as cattle, suffered the selling of their children, were sexually abused, carried out men's work in the fields and supported their homes. Furthermore, this institution shaped certain sexist images that still persist in American society. The black female was believed to be incredibly sexually active, when a woman was not supposed to have any sexuality. She was devalued for her physical and psychological strength, when strength was attributed to men, and also for their lack of beauty, when beauty was synonymous of female and White.[13] Besides, as Rennie Simson states,[14] African American women, conditioned by White society's views of Black men, considered their men as nonproductive, unreliable and weak, not able to fight for Blacks' liberation. As Harriet Jacobs concluded in her autobiography, "slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women".[15] The African American woman, poor, female and Black, had to create her own definitions in order to survive, without denying any essential aspect of herself. Consequently, they developed, little by little, a high sense of self-reliance to overcome their hard living conditions. Their self-confidence originated the stereotypes of being "aggressive, pushy and domineering",[16] as well as the myths of Black matriarchy and African American women's great strength and power.

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[13] Barbara Christian, " Creating a Universal Literature: Afro-American Women Writers", *Black Feminist Criticism. Perspectives on Black Women Writers*, p. 161.

[14] Rennie Simson, "The Afro-American Female. The Historical Context of The Construction of Sexual Identity", *Powers of Desire. The Politics of Sexuality*. Ed. by Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell & Sharon Thompson. (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983), p. 229.

[15] Ibid., p. 231.

[16] Ibid., p. 229.

By the middle of the 19th century, Maria W. Stewart encouraged the women of her time to write.[17] She was the first American woman to lecture in public on political issues and to handle copies out of her texts. She asked: "How long shall the fair daughters of Africa be compelled to bury their minds and talents beneath the load of iron pots and kettles?".[18] Stewart's words and deeds, compiled by Marilyn Richardson in her book *Maria W. Stewart, America's First Black Woman Political Writer* (1987), encouraged African American women to reject the negative images of Black womanhood portrayed in both White and Black literature, such as the mammy, the concubine, the conjure woman and the tragic mulatta.[19]

Stewart considered negative images those in which Black women were viewed as aggressive, domineering, arrogant and ambitious, arisen as a result of the myths and stereotypes previously mentioned. She pointed out that racial and sexual oppression were the fundamental causes of their poverty, but, since they were unable to modify the existing social structure, Stewart believed they had to try to redefine their environment to fit their own needs. Therefore, she urged the African American women of her time to forge self definitions of self-reliance and independence, because the power of self-determination was essential for their survival:

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17 See Marilyn Richardson, *Maria W. Stewrat, America's First Black Woman Political Writer.* (Bloomington: Indiana University Pres, 1987).

18 Ibid., p. 59.

19 Barbara Christian, "Images of Black Women in Afro-American Literature: From Stereotype to Character", *Black Feminist Criticism. Perspectives on Black Women Writers*, pp. 2-3.

> Possess the spirit of independence . . . Sue for your rights and privileges. Know the reason you cannot attain them. Weary them with your importunities. You can but die if you make the attempt; and we shall certainly die if you do not.[20]

Stewart not only pointed out the sources of Black women's oppression but she also wanted women to act and stand up for their rights. She equally underlined the pivotal importance of knowledge: "turn your attention to knowledge and improvement; for knowledge is power".[21] Furthermore, she believed in the power of Black women as educators, committed to pass on their knowledge to their children, so that they could create in their offspring a sense of who they really were and fight for their rights. Maria W. Stewart believed, only by achieving self-reliance and a thorough knowledge of their past, would African American women survive. In order to reach self-reliance they would have to lead a battle within themselves, topic which will be discussed in the following chapters.

Little by little, African American women's voices began to be heard and authors such as Harriet E. Wilson, and, already mentioned, Frances E. Harper, arose and managed to publish their work in the late 19th century and beginning of the 20th century. Between the beginning of the 20th century and the 1920s, there was a great cultural agitation among the African American community, which reached its culmination in the celebrated Harlem Renaissance. Within this cultural movement, female writers, such as Jessie Redmon Fauset, Nella Larsen and Zora Neale Hurston, could be pointed out. The Harlem Renaissance involved the

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[20] Marylin Richardson, *Maria W. Stewart, America's First Black Woman Political Writer*, p. 38.

[21] Ibid., p. 41.

attempt of African American authors to develop a strong cultural presence in America. Although they claimed their race-pride and were concerned with their African past, these writers avoided incorporating the dialect and stereotypes of their own culture in their writings in order to be accepted by the larger White audience.

Later, in the 1960s, Frantz Fanon stated that Black people needed to know their own past in order to open their future and create a basis for hope.[22] Therefore, African Americans were able to establish a continuity with their African past. The decade of the 1960s meant the rise of Black consciousness and the affirmation of Black pride. African American people became proud of their history, their language, their dance, music and songs. They started to include the *stereotypes that Whites had created about Blacks in literature so as to analyze,* talk about and get rid of them, to write about their own culture, traditions, folklore, and to use their own language. In this regard, Houston A. Baker, Jr. asserts:

> The writers of the twenties . . . were interested in shedding their chrysalises in order to merge into the mainstream of American life. Today's writers, however, are engaged in an attempt to construct a chrysalis of blackness, a distinctive covering which will set them appart and enable them to grasp the essence of the black American's reality.[23]

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[22] See, Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of The Earth.* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1973).

[23] Houston A. Baker, Jr., *Black Literature in America*, p. 17.

African American people were involved in the reaffirmation of their Black tradition. Thus, in the 1960s and 1970s, released from past stereotypes and committed to address their work to a Black audience, African American women were devoted to portray what being born Black and female in a White society meant. In this regard, they intended to reconcile their heritage of African ancestry with the American culture they were also part of. Because of the desire of gaining a true identity in America, they attempted to preserve their natural language, sounds and traditions, so as to feel a continuity with their African past.

In the 1970s and 1980s, African American women authors recognized their common literary ancestors and conceived themselves inheritors of a literary female tradition. Writers such as Toni Cade Bambara, Gayl Jones, Toni Morrison, Gloria Naylor, Sherley Anne Williams claimed Zora Neale Hurston as the predecessor of this literary tradition. Hurston's public recognition nowadays is due to the writer Alice Walker's physical and literary "re-discovery" of Hurston, who in 1973 searched and found Hurston's unmarked grave.

After this initial exaltation of Blackness, African American women writers began to analyze their traditions more deeply, and to observe oppressive values rooted within those traditions. Moreover, African American women personified the need to reconcile their African heritage with the new culture they were living in. Thus, Alexis DeVeaux's play *The Tapestry* (1975), for example, presents a young woman who leads a struggle within herself because she needs to reconcile her African past, which overpowers her, with her American present.[24] And, after her stay in the African continent, Alice Walker wrote her first published book in

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[24] Alexis DeVeaux, *The Tapestry* (1974), *Nine Plays By Black Women*. Ed. by Margaret B. Wilkerson. (New York: Mentor Book, 1986).

1965, *Once: Poems*. Although the book was written during the heyday of African Americans' romantic feelings for their motherland and some women authors presented their female characters' journey to Africa, as a means of finding their true African selves in that continent,[25] Walker described Africa with images that demythologized their view of that continent. In her later novel *The Color Purple*, Walker explored gender oppression in Africa and confirmed that it exists in America as well as in Africa. Nettie, one of the main characters in her book, admits: "Black women have been the mules of the world there and the mules of the world here".[26] Moreover, Nettie's letters undermined some prevalent myths of Africa, including female genital mutilation, which became Walker's latest novel's central theme.

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[25] Novels such as Paule Marshall's *Browngirl, Brownstones* (1959) and *Praisesong for The Widow* (1983), and Audre Lorde's *Zami* (1982), just to mention a few.

[26] Alice Walker, *The Color Purple*. (New York: Washington Square Press, 1982),p. 132.

II.- PRAISING AND DECONSTRUCTING TRADITION IN *POSSESSING THE SECRET OF JOY*.

Since the beginning of her writing career, Alice Walker has presented a Black woman-centered world in her novels.[1] Her main concern is the lives, souls and feelings of Black women, whom she senses she shares many common and close experiences with.[2] She portrays "outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful" Black women, who are "the most fascinating creations in the world", as she herself acknowledged to an interviewer.[3]

Moreover, Alice Walker's novels are attempts to historicise the present by evoking the past. Her female characters are women in conflict, who lead a struggle within themselves because they have to find the right path which will allow them to define themselves as women being conscious of their African and American backgrounds in a world which underestimate their African origin and which is hostile to them.

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[1] Alice Walker started to write during her years in College, in the earlier 1960s, although her work was first published a few years later. She was born in the South into a sharecrooper family. She traveled to Africa in 1964 in her last year of College. On her return to the United States, Walker aborted a pregnancy which led her to the verge of a suicide. Writing was the therapy followed to overcome her depression. The poems she wrote, which would form her first published collection of poetry, *Once. Poems* (1968), served Walker as an act of reaffirmation of her will to live during the crisis.

[2] According to Mary Helen Washington, Walker's "sense of personal identification with Black women includes a sense of sharing their peculiar oppression. In some length she describes her own attempts at suicide when she discovered herself pregnant in her last year of College and at the mercy of everything, especially her own body . . . Ms. Walker [speaks] of her own awareness of and experiences with brutality and violence in the lives of Black women, many of whom she had known as a girl growing up in Eatonton, Georgia, some in her own family". See Mary Helen Washington, "An Essay on AliceWalker", *Sturdy Black Bridges. Visions of Black Women's Literature*. Ed. by Roseann P. Bell, Bettye J. Parker & Beverly Guy-Sheftall. (New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1979), p. 134.

[3] John O'Brien, ed., *Interviews with Black Writers*. (New York: Liveright, 19730, p. 192.

Committed to this return to her past, Alice Walker is one of the writers that has tried to look for those African American women who, during the last century and beginning of the 20th, have worked in isolation, and have not yet been granted a place in the literary canon: "There are countless vanished and forgotten women. . . [Female writers] must work to find them, to free them from their neglect and the oppression forced upon them because they were black and they were women".[4] These "vanished and forgotten" women's works have come to be considered of great importance for the development of contemporary intellectuals and writers' identity.[5] In her essay "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens", Walker acknowledges:

> I am so involved with my own writing that I don't think there will be time for me to attempt the long, scholarly involvement that all these writers require. I am hopeful, however, that as their books are reissued and used in classrooms across the country, someone will do this. If no one does (or if no one does it to my satisfaction), I feel it is my duty . . . to do it myself.[6]

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[4] Alice Walker, "A Talk: Convocation 1972". *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*. (New York: Harcourt Brace & Jovanovich, 1983), p. 36.

[5] There have been two movements which have helped young female Black writers to claim their cultural heritage and identify the literary tradition which they belong to: in America, The Civil Rights Movement, and, internationally, The Women's Liberation Movement.

[6] Alice Walker, "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens", *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, p. 273.

This is the case of Zora Neale Hurston, who in spite of having been a central figure during the Harlem Renassainee, lied buried and forgotten for many years in an unmarked grave. Alice Walker has repeatedly proclaimed Hurston as her literary precursor. She dedicates, for example *In Love and Trouble . Stories of Black Women* as well as the story in it, "The Revenge of Hannah Kemhuff", to the memory of Hurston. She even searched for Hurston's unmarked grave, which she finally found in Florida in 1973. Walker related her pilgrimage to Hurston's grave in her essay "Looking for Zora" (1975).

In the journey from the stereotyped images to a more varied view of Black women, Zora Neale Hurston's work is of great importance. She developed a great interest in African American folk traditions and nowadays she has become well known as a storyteller. Her novels were committed to the Black oral narrative and the representations of her people's talk, and incorporated the richness and beauty of Black folk literature and the tradition of storytelling. As Carolyn L. Homes assures, Hurston

> grew up with loving memories of her people's religious fervor, their colorful stories, customs, music and dramatic expression . . . She would eventually re-create the black world of her childhood in the unique pageantry of her folklore.[7]

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7 Carolyn L. Homes, "Reassessing African American Literature through an Afrocentric Paradigm: Zora N. Hurston and James Baldwin", *Language and Literature in the African American Imagination*. Ed. by Carol Aisha Blackshire-Beley. (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1992), p. 40.

According to Walker, Hurston's work has shown African American women who they really are: "descendants of an inventive, joyous, courageous, and outrageous people; loving drama, appreciating wit, and, most of all, relishing the pleasure of each other's loquacious and bodacious company".[8] Walker has learned to appreciate her "underprivileged background".[9] Therefore, achieving continuity of time, a link between her past and her present, has become Walker's aim.

Hurston's efforts to perpetuate African American cultural heritage have been shared by Alice Walker. Walker's goal is to preserve the oral tradition of her people, since she is convinced that personal identity depends upon the knowledge of familial and racial history. In her essay "The Dummy in the Window", Walker gathers the stories her parents used to tell her as a child which "had come down to them orally and were passed on to their children orally".[10] The author states that "folklore is at the heart of self-expression and therefore at the heart of self-acceptance",[11] and in her novels she keeps returning to the African tradition of storytelling and mythology.

In her essay "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens", Walker relates how she got fascinated by the stories told to her by her mother and grandmother as a

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[8] Alice Walker, "Zora Neale Hurston: A Cautionary Tale and a Partisan View", *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, p. 85.

[9] Donna Haisty Winchell, *Alice Walker* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1992), p. 17.

[10] Alice Walker, "The Dummy in The Window", *Living by The Word* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1988), p. 31.

11 Ibid., p. 32.

child.[12] Thus, a strong tie between mother and daughter developed.[13] Walker also claims her admiration for the women of her mother's time and of previous times, who raised their children in very harsh conditions but had the capacity of making life as easy and beautiful for their family as possible by offering love and shelter.[14] Those women, in spite of the difficulties, perpetuated a tradition: storytelling. As bell hooks states, through the "talk story" Black women were able to communicate their philosophy of being and living.[15] So, through their stories they were able to give a strong support to their children. Mothers and grandmothers were the driving force that offered the security and self-confidence needed to survive, to face the world's hardships. Therefore, Walker gives these women the status of artists since she has realized that the stories she writes, are her mother's stories:

> Only recently did I fully realize this: that through years of listening to my mother's stories of her life, I have absorbed not only the stories

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[12] Alice Walker was a solitary and lonely child due to the fact that at the age of eight she was accidentally shot in an eye by one of her brothers which left her a disfiguring scar. See Bernard Bell, *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition*. (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1987), p. 259.

[13] It might have been, though, an ambiguous relationship. In an interview with Evelyn C. White, Walker questions her relationship with her mother. She explains that the loss of her right eye caused her a "patriarchal wound" since her parents had bought her brother a gun with which he finally shot her. See Evelyn C. White, "Alice Walker's Compassionate Crusade", *Sojourner: The Women's Forum* 19:7 (March 1994): 1H.

[14] Alice Walker, " In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens", *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, pp. 238-9.

[15] bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics*. (Boston: South End Press, 1990), p. 123.

> themselves, but something of the manner in which she spoke, something of the urgency that involves the knowledge that her stories --like her life-- must be recorded. It is probably for this reason that so much of what I have written is about characters whose counterparts in real life are so much older than I am .[16]

It is not only the stories her mother told her but also the way she spoke and her sound that are decisive in Alice Walker's development as an artist. She claims that the telling of these stories was as natural for her mother as breathing.[17] Walker identifies her mother's storytelling as the source of her own art, and, thus, commits herself to perpetuate these women's tradition in her own work:

> And our mothers and grandmothers have more often than not anonymously, handed on the creative spark, the seed of the flower they themselves never hoped to see: or like a sealed letter they could not plainly read . . . no song or poem will bear my mother's name. Yet so many of the stories that I write, that we all write, are my mother's stories.[18]

So, Walker maintains a cultural tradition which her "mothers" had embraced in order to safeguard their heritage that, otherwise, might have disappeared.

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[16] Alice Walker, "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens". *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, p. 240.

[17] Ibid., p. 240.

[18] Ibid., p. 240.

In her attempt to evoke the past in the present she establishes a continuity of time. There is a spiritual connection between the author and the characters of her stories. In the epigraph to *The Color Purple* Walker thanks "everybody for coming" and addresses herself as "author and medium".[19] In *The Temple of My Familiar* she thanks the Universe for her "participation in Existence", and claims: "It is a pleasure to have always been present".[20] In the first novel, Walker reveals herself as the medium, that is to say, the characters speak through her. In the second book, she expresses her belief in the continuity of time, the link between past and present. Considering herself as a "medium", and by associating authorship with magic, and invoking the creativity of her mother, grandmother and the women around her, Walker recognizes the common literary ancestors she shares with the early women, those who had the "Ancient Power".[21] These women ancestors possessed a "magical" power to make up stories and tell them to their daughters. They established a women's tradition, handed down along female lines, generation after generation. This tradition contains the strategies by which every woman overcomes the obstacles to personal evolution and self-expression.[22]

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[19] Alice Walker, *The Color Purple*. (New York: Washington Square Press, 1982), p. 253.

[20] Alice Walker, *The Temple of My Familiar*. (London: Penguin Books, 1989), p. 459.

[21] Marjorie Pryse, "Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker, and The 'Ancient Power' of Black Women", *Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction and Literary Tradition*. Ed. by Marjorie Pryse & Hortense J. Spillers. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), p. 3.

[22] Ibid., p. 3.

In the journey to her African roots, Alice Walker writes a new novel, *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992),[23] which is very powerful in reflecting a deep-rooted African rite: female genital mutilation and its effects on women's sexuality. In this novel, the author takes up again the African tradition of storytelling: "I have claimed the storyteller's prerogative to recast or slightly change events alluded to or described in the earlier books, in order to emphasize and enhance the meaning of the present tale".[24] Although Walker retakes her roots and becomes part of the Black women's tradition, she also analyses the consequences some rites of African culture have on African women.

Possessing portrays the story of Tashi, a young woman, born and brought up in Africa, but spending her adulthood in America. Tashi tries to reconcile her African roots and her American present. Moreover, she has to overcome the fatal consequences a traditional African rite has caused upon her: the practise of female genital mutilation. In a note to the reader, Alice Walker explains the genesis of the novel: one of the characters that had had short appearances in the previous two books, Tashi, did not leave Walker's mind and stayed with her through the writings of the next two novels. It was during the filming of *The Color Purple*, that the young woman from Kenya, who played the role of Tashi, made her think of all those girls who were forced to undergo the so-called rite of

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[23] This novel is considered as the third and last part of the trilogy formed by *The Color Purple* (1982) and *The Temple of My Familiar* (1989). Although obviously connected, they can be read separately.

[24] Alice Walker, *Possessing The Secret of Joy*. (New York: Pocket Books/Washington Square Press, 1992), pp. 283-4. Further references to the novel will appear in the text as *Possessing* and the page number.

initiation into womanhood. She finally comprehended that Tashi deserved her own story. Thus, Tashi becomes the heroine of *Possessing*.

In this novel, Walker denounces a worlwide spread rite practised on women, which she considers cruel and inhuman. Walker recalls in the epigraph of her novel that:

> It is estimated that from ninety to one hundred million women and girls living today in African, 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 (*Possessing* 283).

So, Tashi's story is firmly rooted in the female experience in today's Africa, America and Europe.

Walker plays with the duality of praising the African tradition of storytelling and denouncing the African practises of female genital mutilation. Through a simultaneous use of these two traditions, which have the same origin, Walker makes a critical exploration of the same African roots. Consequently, Alice Walker chooses a specific African narrative form, that of storytelling, to question and deconstruct the African customs and traditions in which female genital mutilation is performed, a practise that is deep-rooted in the ancient African mythological and religious beliefs.

In her novel, Walker recovers the Dogon's African community's[25] myth of God and Creation, which states that there is an interconnection between beliefs and practises in African religions. The myth tells that the God Amma tried to have intercourse with the Earth, whose sexual organ was an anthill and its clitoris a termite hill:

> At God's approach the termite hill rose up, barring the passage and displaying its masculinity. It was as strong as the organ of the stranger, and intercourse could not take place. But God is all-powerful. He cut down the termite hill, and had intercourse with the excised earth. But the original incident was destined to affect the course of things forever... (*Possessing* 173-4).

The myth also explains how at the beginning human beings were bisexual, male and female: "In the man the female soul was located in the prepuce; in the woman the male soul was in the clitoris" (*Possessing* 175). So, the man is circumcised to get rid of his femininity and the woman is excised to get rid of her masculinity. Geoffrey Parrinder's explanation to the myth is that

> every human being has two souls at first; man is bi-sexual. But a man's female soul is removed at circumcision, when he becomes a

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[25] The Dogon people are located in Upper Volta, a country located on the West of the African continent, surrounded by Mali, Niger and Nigeria.

true man, and the corresponding event happens to a woman at excision.[26]

The myth of Creation justifies the necessity of male and female excision; consequently, suggesting to Africans that female excision is a cruel practise, would mean the denial of their most ancient beliefs and traditions.

For a better understanding of the novel and because of its bluntness in presenting how female excision is practised and the results and consequences of Tashi's operation, it is important to underline the difference existing between two terms that refer to women's genital mutilation: female circumcision and female genital mutilation. Historically, the term female circumcision has been used to design any operation done to women's genitals. The term alluded to three types of operation: clitoridectomy, excision and/or infibulation. Nowadays, however, the term female genital mutilation (FGM)[27] is more commonly used since it emphasizes the harshness of the practice and the mutilation of a woman's body, and whereas the former term brings to mind male circumcision which is not equivalent nor similar to the one practiced on the female.

Infibulation is the most severe of the three types of the operations mentioned above. It consists of the removal of all or part of the clitoris and the labia. Incisions are also made to create raw surfaces which are stitched together

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26 Geoffrey Parrinder, *African Mythology*. (London: Hamlyn, 1967), pp. 23-4.

27 Further references to the operation will be as FGM.

to cover the vagina leaving a very small hole for urine and menstrual blood. (Tashi suffered this operation when she was a young woman).[28] Recent studies, though, have proved that it is usually performed on little girls and under unhygienic conditions. The operator usually is an old woman or a midwife, but it may also be practised by a man.

This brutal mutilation of the woman's body produces both physical and psychological effects. Infibulated women have a damaged health and experience less sexual fulfilment. In Tashi's community, circumcised women even show a typical walk. After the operation Tashi notices that "her own proud walk had become a shuffle" (*Possessing* 65). Besides, according to Hanny Lightfood-Klein's studies on the subject on female genital mutilation in Africa,[29] in many cases, the operation might be followed by feelings of anxiety, terror, humiliation and betrayal. The trauma of the operation may imply a calmer behaviour which is considered positive in these societies. However, a circumcised woman feels relieved for being accepted by her society, since she has followed the traditions of her culture. An uncircumcised woman in a female genital mutilation practising society is rejected by her community and she will be regarded as "unclean".[30]

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[28] Although Tashi actually experiences this type of operation, the term used throughout the novel is "circumcision". Consequently, "circumcision" will be the term used when referring to Tashi's operation.

[29] Hanny Lightfoot-Klein, *Prisoners of Ritual. An Odyssey into Female Genital Circumcision in Africa*. (Binghamton, N.Y.: Harrington Park Press, 1989). The book is recommended by Walker at the end of her novel.

[30] Ibid., p. 70.

In most of the parts where it is practiced, FGM is part of the ceremony of initiation into womanhood. It is performed in groups, usually under a tree, by a river or in a house. It is also associated with festivities and gifts and the girl is exhorted to be brave.[31] Therefore, customs and traditions are the most common reasons for these communities to keep on practicing these rites. In most places it is believed that FGM is necessary for a girl to be considered a woman, since through the operation the "male" parts of the woman's body are removed so as to help her personality to be more femenine. This way the physical differences between male and female are accentuated, since the so-called female equivalent of the penis (the clitoris) is removed.

Although in her previous novels, Walker was mostly concerned with the lives of African American women, in *Possessing*, Walker focuses on an African woman and carries out an exploration of female experiences which she recognizes as oppressive, and denounces the barbarity of the female genital mutilation and the sexist discrimination inherent in African societies. The novel is about the tyranny of gender construction African women have suffered and are still suffering. Walker denounces a rite which is much praised as an ancient African tradition, whose procedure is, in fact, desexualizing: it commits an outrage against women's body, and, therefore, besides physical and emotional consequences, it denies the pleasure from all sexual activity. Consequently, the woman is impeded from developing as a full human being since her sexual self is denied by the performance of this tradition.

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[31] Ibid., p. 52.

III.- MUTILATED BODY AND FRAGMENTED SELF: THE UNIFICATION OF BODY AND SELF.

The female body dominates Alice Walker's *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. Conceived as the site of harmful social and cultural practises, the female body represents the complex relation between individual and community, and embodies oppositions such as Africa versus America, tradition versus modernity, death versus life, fear and hate versus trust and love. Thus, Walker's narrative, which analyzes the control and abuse of female sexuality, transforms the female body into a text which reflects the physical and emotional consequences of the traditional practise of female circumcision. The woman subjected to such tradition, denied of her sexual self, and, thus, of her complete development as a human being, splits into different selves. Through Walker's narrative, the reconstruction of the fragmented female self and mutilated body of the central character, Tashi, becomes possible. By means of blending body and text, Walker's narrative becomes a fiction of resistance against female circumcision and, thus, breaks up the silence imposed on those women subjected to such tradition.

In *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, the author claims the necessity of exploring the past and the traditions to find the cultural basis that encourage a community to carry out the performance of the rite of female circumcision. Through an accurate and thorough knowledge of her people's past and culture, the woman will be able to find the strength that will change her silence into actions of "**RESISTANCE**" (*Possessing* 281), in Walker's own words, and, finally, break up such cruel rite. Therefore, in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, Tashi is first immersed in a world of grief and anguish, due to the physical and emotional after-effects of circumcision, but it is her own awareness of the rite performed on her, its origin and its social and political dimensions, that leads to her self-fulfilment.

Before analyzing the novel, it is convenient to remember that the author deals with the duality of praising and rejecting some African traditions. Walker, who has repeatedly expressed her belief in the necessity for African Americans to claim their African descent, on the one hand, denounces the rite of female circumcision, whereas on the other, she values her African past and heritage. Already one of the major characters in Walker's *The Color Purple*, Nettie, affirms: "We are not white. We are not Europeans. We are black like the Africans themselves. And that we and the Africans will be working for a common goal: the uplift of Black people everywhere".[1] In the same way, in the epigraph to *Possessing*, Walker recognizes Tashi, her heroine, as her sister: "Certainly, I recognize Tashi as my sister" (*Possessing* 285). Consequently, the author feels a connection between herself and her protagonist, equal to what she felt towards the protagonists of her previous two novels, *The Color Purple* and *The Temple of My Familiar*.[2] Her connection with Africa is also exemplified in some words of African origin included in the novel. In this regard, Walker assures:

> *Tsunga*,[3] like many of my "African" words, is made up. Perhaps it, and the other words I use, are from an African language I used to know, now tossed up by my unconscious. I do not know from what part of Africa my African ancestors came, and so I claim the continent. I suppose I have created Olinka as my village and the Olinkans as one of my ancient, ancestral tribal peoples (*Possessing* 284-5).

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1 Alice Walker, *The Color Purple*. (New York: Washington Square Press, 1982), p. 127.

2 See Chapter Two, p. 22.

3 *Tsunga* is the word made up by Alice Walker to refer to the midwife, the woman who performs circumcision.

Thus, Walker evokes the spiritual connections between her and her characters and she believes the link with the past to be of vital importance for the survival of her people.

Taking up again the idea of duality within the novel, and without denying her African roots, Walker assumes the task of demonstrating how her people's traditions and folklore, rooted in the African culture, are beneficial for the survival of her community, and yet they still may be used to justify women's domination and abuse by men. Furthermore, although setting her novel partially in Africa, Walker points out that gender mutilation and sexual oppression of women are still current facts throughout the world. Walker's focus on female circumcision indicates her deep involvement in a literary struggle since she believes that commitment is the source of creativity, and that if the artist refuses the commitment, s/he will not be able to discover "some kind of larger freedom".[4]

Through Tashi's character, *Possessing* renders African women's emotional lives. Walker expresses her anger due to the oppressive sexual attitudes African women are exposed to, and emphasizes the physical and emotional destruction and mutilation these attitudes cause upon those women. Furthermore, after analyzing the origin and cultural foundation of those rituals, discovering who instigates and encourages the submission to these traditions, Walker requests the responsibility of the Black community for Black women's victimization. The novel details, on the one hand, Tashi's surrender to tradition by undergoing circumcision, thereby denying her sexuality and destroying her sanity; and, on the other, Tashi's long struggle to reconstruct her mutilated self so as to recover her self-identity.

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[4] Eva Lennox Birch, "Alice Walker (b. 1944). The Spiritual Inheritance", *Black American Women's Writing. A Quilt of Many Colors*. (Hertfordshire: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1944), p. 237.

Besides, born African but spending her adult life in America, Tashi is caught between these two cultures, and needs to reconcile them in order to achieve self-fulfilment. Thus, the novel not only exposes the bloody ritual and its damaging effects but also sets Africa in opposition to America, and the individual in opposition to the community.

III.1. The female body as the site of violence

As she explained in an interview with Claudia Tate, Walker is committed to portray "the oppressions, the insanities, the loyalties, and the triumphs of black women".[5] Placing her novels in the South of the United States, she presents the lives of abused and underestimated women. Mem in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, Celie in *The Color Purple*, the women in *In Love and Trouble. Stories of Black Women*, are just a few examples of the exploited and oppressed women Walker portrays in her novels. In *Possessing*, although she changes the setting of her previous novels to Africa, Walker relates the life of an abused woman, whose body, like Mem's and Celie's, is the focus of the violence exerted upon her. Thus, the female body, mutilated and wounded, is conceived as the site of violence, pain and humiliation.

Intervied by Evelyn C. White, Walker said that she first became aware of female genital mutilation during her trip to East Africa in 1965. She said:

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5 Claudia Tate, "Alice Walker", *Black Women Writers at Work*. (New York: The Continuum Publishing, 1988), p. 178.

> I would hear people talking about this initiation ceremony that women went through, but it really held no meaning for me. . . . Over time, I came to understand that this so-called ceremony was the removal of the clitoris and other parts of a woman's genitalia. After the organs are cut out, the [area] is sewn up, allowing only a tiny opening for the passage of menstrual blood or urine. [For intercourse and childbirth the vagina is cut open and then resewn]. Thinking about it horrorified and haunted me.[6]

By identifying herself with the sufferings of the women who undergo circumcision, Walker begins weaving Tashi's story in order to portray the lifes and sorrows of those women. It is already in the opening passage to the novel that the reader learns what the focus of the novel is. The passage is taken from *The Color Purple*, where Tashi, as mentioned in Chapter Two, had a brief appearance. It reveals Tashi's intention to undergo the rites of circumcision and scarification of her face as an attempt to "make her people feel better" (*Possessing* 1). So, undergoing those rites is a personal decision Tashi makes, but more important, it is a decision made in order to please and content her people. Consequently, in spite of the fact that the theme of circumcision is brought up later on in the novel, it is assumed that Walker's novel is going to deal with gender mutilation and its social and cultural implications as an ancient tradition and belief.

In *Possessing*, Walker has chosen to return to a realistic mode of fiction, besides the imaginary elements inherent in the traditional act of storytelling that prevail in the novel. Her realism is especially evident in the descriptions of circumcision and its after-effects, which are not treated in an imaginary way, but as real facts. As pointed out by Lennox-Birch, "even just reading the

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[6] Evelyn C. White, "Alice Walker's Compassionate Crusade", *Sojourner : The Women's Forum* 19:7 (March 1994), p. 1H.

unelaborated, factual description of the physical consequences of clitoridectomy makes the female reader writhe in pain".[7] Walker's aim, though, is to provoke both the female reader, who will obviously feel connected with Tashi's pain, and the male reader, who might not really know how this rite is performed. Walker seeks to provoke the reader to act and to stop that oppressive situation, since both the male and the female experience the fatal consequences of the operation. *Possessing* portrays Tashi's suffering and also explores how the ritual performance affects her closest family and friends.

Walker's bluntness when describing the circumcision operation, recalls Antonin Artaud's notion of theatre. As Araceli Rico states in her book about the Mexican painter Frida Kahlo, Artaud, the creator of the "Theatre of Cruelty", seeks in theatre a catharsis between the actor and the spectator.[8] Thus, the actor dramatizes his/her existential conflict, with the grief and suffering it involves, directing it to the outside --the audience--, in order to make the spectator participant of his/her struggle. Artaud conceives theatre as a performance, where both the actor and the spectator take part, and this fact gives them the opportunity of a collective healing. For Artaud, theatre should be cruel and inhuman, in order to show a permanent internal conflict whose focal point is the body. Like Artaud, Walker shows violence and cruelty to define the descriptions of Tashi's circumcised body:

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7 Eva Lennox-Birch, "Alice Walker (b. 1944). The Spiritual Inheritance", *Black American Women's Writing. A Quilt of Many Colors*, p. 237.

8 Araceli Rico, *Frida Kahlo. Fantasía de un Cuerpo Herido*. (México D.F.: Plaza y Valdés, 1990), p. 30-1.

> 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 as M'Lissa [9] 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 together, shutting the opening completely; cramps caused by the residual flow that could not find its way out, was not reabsorbed into her body and had nowhere to go. There was the odor, too, of soured blood, which no amount of scrubbing, until we got to America, ever washed off. (*Possessing* 65).

As these lines reveal, Walker shows the harshness of the operation procedure in order to establish empathy between Tashi and the reader. Walker's aim is to create a bond between the protagonist and the reader, but, having in mind that the novel is a tale, as Walker herself acknowledges (*Possessing* 283-4), she also claims for a bond between the protagonist and the person who is actually listening to her story. In the novel, this bond between Tashi and the reader is exemplified in Tashi's and her psychologist's (Raye) close friendship. When Tashi tells Raye about her sufferings and fears, Raye inflicts pain on herself, willing to better understand Tashi, as we are told by Tashi:

> Later, when she could speak more clearly, she told me how it had bothered her that the kind of pain I must have endured during circumcision was a pain she could hardly imagine; and so, having been told by her dentist that she had severe pockets of gum disease, . . . , she'd had her gums turned down like socks around her teeth, their edges clipped and insides scraped, and then sewed up again, tight, around the roots of her teeth (*Possessing* 133).

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[9] M'Lissa, the *tsunga*, is the woman who practises the circumcision operation.

By undergoing this "gum circumcision", Raye is able to appreciate Tashi's pain which creates a bond between the two women: "Raye became someone [Tashi] felt [she] knew; someone with whom [she] could bond" (*Possessing* 134). Touched by Raye's affection for her, Tashi affirms that "[Raye] was intuitively practicing an ageless magic, the foundation of which was the ritualization, or the acting out, of empathy. How theatre was born?" (*Possessing* 134). Like Artaud, Walker believes empathy to be on the basis of the theatre.

Apart from the violence exerted on Tashi's body during her circumcision, Walker also emphasizes the operation after-effects in Tashi's sexual encounters with her husband, Adam. She has to suffer the later attempts of sexual intercourse with Adam, which are extremely painful and grievous. Because of the tiny opening the *tsunga* had left in Tashi's vagina, penetration is not possible during the sexual act:

> After three months of trying, [Adam] had failed to penetrate me. Each 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. Still, somehow, I became pregnant with Benny. Having experienced the pain of getting Benny "up in there", we were terrorized waiting for his birth (*Possessing* 60).

Cruelty and violence are also what Tashi experiences at the moment of giving birth. In spite of the pain involved in every sexual encounter, Tashi gets pregnant somehow due "to the agressive mobility of sperm" (*Possessing* 57). Her son's birth, which takes place in North America, is an arduos moment for her. Benny's birth is described by Walker in a very blunt and cruel way:

> The obstetrician broke two instruments trying to make an opening large enough for Benny's head. Then [the doctor] used a scalpel. Then a pair of scissors used ordinarily to sever cartilage from bone. All this he told me when I woke up, a look of horror lingering on his face. A look he tried to camouflage by joking (*Possessing* 57).

So much suffering implicit in Tashi's and Adam's unsuccessful attempts of making love bears a retarded child: "Benny, my radiant brown baby, the image of Adam, was retarded. Some small but vital part of his brain crushed by our ordeal" (*Possessing* 61). The enormity of the "cleaning out" of the female genitals, the sewing up and after-effects of the operation, the husband's painful attempts of penetration, are not left to the reader's imagination. Thereby, the reader, compassionate towards Tashi's tragedy, establishes an emotional link with the character, just like the different characters in the novel get involved and are affected by her suffering, as mentioned above.

Tashi's tragedy is revealed through her body. As a matter of fact, in Walker's novel, the body is conceived as the source of unpleasure and the site of violence. The procedure of circumcision, which is done on a dirty floor with a tin can, a shard of glass or a sharpened stone's edge, is so painful and grievous that it has, not only cut away Tashi's clitoris, but also her possibility of lovemaking that is now painful and humiliating.[10] Tashi not only suffers the violent attack of the "knives" in the *tsunga* 's hands, but also the attempts to penetrate her. Lovemaking for Tashi becomes an act of violence in itself, an outrage against her body. Therefore, eroticism becomes a synonym for violence. Every sexual act turns out to be a struggle, in which the man, "whose pleasure depends on an

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10 In Chapter Two, it was already mentioned that Tashi went through the most severe type of circumcision, infibulation, which consists of the removal of the clitoris and the labia, leaving but a tiny aperture for urine and menstrual blood.

opening it might take months, even years, to enlarge" (*Possessing* 224), needs to fight to enlarge the opening left by the *tsunga*, because "men love and enjoy the struggle" (*Possessing* 224). Circumcision has implied the mutilation of Tashi's body and the eradication of Tashi's possibility of lovemaking and her ability to feel.

Tashi's body bears the visible wounds --the marks on her face, "the hidden scar between Tashi's thin legs" (*Possessing* 66)--, and invisible wounds --the destruction of her sexuality-- that circumcision has caused her. Her body, where the pain concentrates on, becomes a visible and concrete proof of Tashi's hurt. As a consequence, after the operation, Tashi acquires the peculiar walk, a sliding gait, that characterizes the "proper Olinka maiden" (*Possessing* 153):

> It was only when she at last was told by M'Lissa, who one day unbound her legs, that she might sit up and walk a few steps that she noticed her own proud walk had become a shuffle (*Possessing* 65).

Her way of walking, "[shuffling] slowly and painfully, barely lifting her legs at all, and gliding her feet along the ground",[11] illustrates the overwhelming pain and humiliation her submission to the tradition of circumcision has given her. Humiliating, as well, is the odor that comes from the wound between her legs:

> No one mentioned the eternity it took her to use the W.C.. No one mentioned the smell.
> In America, we solved the problem of cleaning behind the scar by using a medical syringe that looked like a small turkey baster, and

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11 Hanny Lightfoot-Klein, *Prisoners of Ritual. An Odyssey into Female Genital Circumcision in Africa*. (New York: Harrington Park Press, 1989), p. 57.

> this relieved Tashi of an embarrassment so complete she had taken to spending half the month completely hidden from human contact, virtually buried (*Possessing* 67).

The bad odor of her body after the operation, shames her. Her son remembers how "[his] mother bathed constantly, as if to rid herself of any scent whatsoever . . . To smell like herself seemed beyond her ability to accept" (*Possessing* 96). She avoids, as Benny says, any human contact: "I like to snuggle her . . . She barely tolerates it, though, and immediately moves away" (*Possessing* 96). It is such a humiliating experience that Tashi hides herself from the rest of the world and isolates herself in her home, where she feels safe from anyone's sight. Her own imprisonment is a graphic symbol of her physical and psychological wounds. Thereby, during her pregnancy, due to the feelings of shame of her own body, Tashi "attended [herself]" because "[she] could not bear the thought of the quick-stepping American nurses looking at [her] as if [she] were some creature from beyond their imaginings" (*Possessing* 60). At the time of giving birth, though, she feels as being in a sideshow, examined by a crowd of doctors and nurses. "In the end, though, Tashi says, I was that creature" (*Possessing* 60), since they keep talking about her "hole" and wondering how penetration could have been possible when contemplating such a small opening: "How did that big baby (Benny was *nine pounds) even get up in there, Mrs. Johnson?" (Possessing 57), the doctor* asks. This is another example of a humiliating experience Tashi has to go through.

Her powerlessness resulting from the aggression her body has suffered leads Tashi to the rupture with her body, "the body [she] long ago left" (*Possessing* 110). Tahsi not longer accepts her body, and, consequently, does not accept herself. Thus, the pain and humiliation Tashi has to face, leads her to the

alienation from her body. Such alienation conveys the loss of her appreciation for her body. Tashi does not appreciate it in such a way that she does not feel attached to it. She senses no self-esteem and experiences "a compulsion of wanting to mutilate herself" (*Possessing* 51). As we are told by Adam, Tashi does not feel anything, neither pleasure nor pain:

> Then one morning I woke up to find the foot of our bed red with blood. Completely unaware of what she was doing, she said, and feeling nothing, she had sliced rings, bloody bracelets, or chains, around her ankles (*Possessing* 51).

Tashi's loss of control over her body hinders her and interferes with her attachment to the outer world. Critic Gabriella Griffin has stated that the absence of control over one's body leads to the absence of control over the physical environment within which one is living.[12] Thus, Tashi isolates herself from the outside world and cannot establish full relationships with that world, a world that she fears. Olivia, Tashi's friend, remembers how:

> It was heartbreaking to see, on their return, how passive Tashi had become. No longer cheerful, or impish. Her movements, which had become merely graceful. Slow. Studied. This was true even of her smile; which she never seemed to offer you without considering it first. That her soul had been dealt a mortal blow was plain to anyone who dared look into her eyes (*Possessing* 66).

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12 Gabriella Griffin, "Writing the Body: Reading Joan Riley, Grace Nichols and Ntozake Shange", *Black Women's Writing*. Ed.by Gina Wisker. (New York: St, Martin Press, 1993), p. 21.

Tashi herself acknowledges her impossibility of relationships with the outside, as she herself states: "I felt the violence rising in me with every encounter with the world outside my home" (*Possessing* 144).

Through Tashi's character, Walker shows the undervalued self of a mutilated woman. Low self-esteem, desire to mutilate her body, self-destruction and isolation from the world, characterize this abused woman. Just like Tashi, Maggie, the protagonist of Walker's short story "Everyday Use", suffers from physical and psychological scars. She "will stand hopelessly in corners, homely and ashamed of the burn scars down her arm and legs",[13] and hides behind a door from the sight of everyone.[14] Tashi will also recognize that "[her] self is hiding behind an iron door" (*Possessing* 45). Thus, physical and emotionally abused women are denied of the possibility of integrating body and self.

III.2. Dualities and Oppositions: The Reconstruction of a Fragmented Self

In *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, Walker's central character resists the oppression she has been submitted to by trying to define and reconstruct her shattered identity, while reconciling her African origin with her American present. Her device is to become a storyteller, and tell her own story. This way, her mutilated body equates her narration. As bell hooks says: "oppressed people resist by identifying themselves as subjects, by defining their reality, shaping their

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[13] Alice Walker, "Everyday Use", *In Love and Trouble. Stories of Black Women*. (San Diego: Harvester/Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973), p. 47.

[14] Ibid., p. 50.

new identity, naming their history, telling their story".[15] Walker's central character, Tashi, is a woman looking for her own voice, which, once accomplished, will enable her to forge her identity. Furthermore, she will trascend and break up the fear and silence she has been immersed in since the time she was the object of gender mutilation. In doing so, as hooks points out, Tashi transforms herself from being an object into being a subject. That is to say, she will become the ruler of her own actions and making herself responsible for her own decisions. Thus, through the voice she acquires telling her story, Walker's character recognizes herself as subject, and converts her silence into language and her actions into acts of self-affirmation. Tashi's point of departure, the acknowledgement that "[she] did not realize for a long time that [she] was dead" (*Possessing* 3), is her first step towards freedom. It is, then, through this blending of body and text that Tashi's narrative becomes a fiction of resistance against female circumcision.

Already in *The Color Purple*, Walker portrayed the life of an abused woman, subjected to incest, rape, rough treatment, and subordinated to man's domination ("A girl is nothing to herself, only to her husband can she become something"[16]), who finally gains selfhood through a lesbian love. In *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, Walker undertakes the task of openly denouncing a widespread practise that, although performed by women, is institutionalized under male power. In *The Color Purple*, Walker taught the sexual importance of women's "little button"; in *Possessing*, dedicated "with Tenderness and Respect To the Blameless Vulva", she condemns female genital mutilation that not only mutilates

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15 bell hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist. Thinking Black*. (Boston: South End Press, 1989), p. 43.

16 Alice Walker, *The Color Purple*, p. 132.

their bodies but deprives women of their sexuality. More concerned with the politics of sex and self than with the politics of class and race, Walker discloses the repercussions of the practise of circumcision on women's sexuality and inquires into the foundations women rely on to hand down, generation after generation, the performance of such rite. Covering a long period of the recent African history, *Possessing* presents Tashi's awakening from the brutal domination and abuse she suffers to a liberated and free sexual self. Consequently, before achieving selfhood, Tashi splits up into different personalities that need to be reconciled in order to attain self-fulfilment.

Walker's *Possessing* is focused on the search for wholeness, a recurrent motif in African American literature. Ntozake Shange's play *for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf* ,[17] for instance, focuses on the search a young African American woman undertakes in order to find her own Black female voice and self. Her search is expressed through the appearance of seven female characters who are just actually one, symbolizing the universality of the search. *Possessing* presents a major character who fragments into different selves as a consequence of the rite of circumcision and her struggle for her integration as one unique self.

According to the writer Alexis DeVeaux, a woman reveals herself as a three-dimensional human being, constituted by a social, political and sexual self. Devoid of one of her selves, the two remaining selves cannot fulfil the woman's development as a complete human being. The woman's development results from the integration of her three selves. Therefore, DeVeaux is "interested in

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17 Ntozake Shange, *for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf.* (New York: Broadway Play Publishing, 1986).

presenting the Black woman in relation to her eros, her sexuality",[18] and tries to analyze "its meaning to her political, emotional and social self ".[19] In the same way, Walker presents Tashi: an African woman who, destituted of her sexual self, is not able to become a whole woman. Her lack of wholeness is clearly expressed by her split into three different personalities symbolized by the three names under which she appears in the novel, Tashi, Evelyn and Mrs. Johnson, where several oppositions merge.

Another reason for Tashi's fragmentation is the conflict within herself of Africa versus America. The African-bornTashi tries to reconcile her origin with Evelyn's American present. Furthermore, if she achieves the reconciliation of these two aspects, Tashi will be able to accept her sexual self, represented by Mrs. Johnson, the third name she adopts. Her internal conflict starts when she leaves Africa to go to America, when her beliefs clash with those of the new society she becomes a member of. From the first moment Tashi realizes that the traditions she has submitted to in Africa do not have any meaning in America. Referring to the ritual scarification of her face, her friend Olivia remembers that in her wedding: "[Adam] married [Tashi], . . . even as [Tashi] protested that, in America [Adam] would grow ashamed of her because of the scars on her face" (*Possessing* 66).

Furthermore, Africa is conceived as the place of death and fear. Tashi, "[whose] soul had been dealt a mortal blow" (*Possessing* 66), associates her emotional death ("I did not realize for a long time that I was dead", *Possessing* 3) with Africa, the place where circumcision was performed on her. That the

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[18] Claudia Tate, "Alexis DeVeaux", *Black Women Writers at Work*, p. 55.

[19] Ibid., p. 56.

practise has damaged her deeply inside becomes obvious at Adam's first glance of Tashi after the operation, when she is still recovering from her wounds:

> The first thing I noticed was the flatness of her gaze. It frightened me . . . Her eyes no longer sparkled with anticipation. They were as flat as eyes that have been painted in and with dull paint (*Possessing* 40-43).

Tashi, who used to be full of life and gaiety, whom Adam made love to, and in doing so, they broke a strong Olinka taboo,[20] is now a lifeless and quiet woman. She has acquired a dead look in her eyes which frightens Adam.[21] After the operation, Tashi feels unsafe in Africa and fears it. America, on the contrary, is the place where she feels safe. "I was in love with America" (*Possessing* 38), Tashi admits. Her journey to Africa clearly sets in opposition America and Africa. Tashi remembers Africa in the following way:

> The bus ride from Ombere station was long. The roads bumpy. The dust everywhere. Each twenty-five kilometers or so we stopped to use roadside facilities. These were not at all like those in America but were entirely makeshift. Smelly holes in the earth on either side of which some forward-thinking person had nailed a board. On these boards, inevitably splashed with urine, one placed one's feet (*Possessing* 149).

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20 As Adam remembers: "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" (*Possessing* 27).

21 Lightfoot-Klein also mentions the withdrawn and flattened expression that is a characteristic of circumcised girls at that period in their lives. (*Prisoners of Ritual . An Odyssey into Female Genital Circumcision in Africa*, p. 198).

She associates America with modernity and progress, security and peacefulness, whereas Africa is associated with fear and cruel tradition. Back in Africa and imprisoned, Tashi says:

> Sometimes I dream of the United States. I love it deeply and miss it terribly . . . In all my dreams there is clear rushing river water and flouncy green trees, and where there are streets they are wide and paved and in the night of my dreams there are lighted windows way above the street; and behind these windows I know people are warm and squeaky clean and eating meat. Safe. I awake here to the odor of unwashed fear, and the traditional porridge and fruit breakfast that hasn't changed since I left. (*Possessing* 55).

In this regard, Tashi makes another important association: the bad corporeal odor after circumcision --of which she is very self-conscious-- and the smell of the African continent. According to her son, as already seen, Tashi "bathed constantly . . . To smell like herself seemed beyond her ability to accept" (*Possessing* 96). This negative perception of her body is paralleled by "the odor of unwashed fear" (*Possessing* 55) she senses in Africa.

America, where she spends her adulthood, is the place where she has felt most protected by everyone around her. She feels very attached to her adopted country, because she believes that the practise that mutilates women is not performed in America. Thereby, when she learns about an American woman who had been circumcised at an early age, she feels that it is a proceeding to make her deny her American side: "They would all take America away from me if they could. But I won't let them" (*Possessing* 168), she cries out. But Tashi's

knowledge of the so-called "sewed-up" women, shows her that female sexual oppression has always existed:

> Many African women have come here, said Amy. Enslaved women. Many of them sold into bondage because they refused to be circumcised, but many of them sold into bondage circumcised and infibulated. It was these sewed-up women who fascinated the American doctors who flocked to the slave auctions to examine them, as the women stood naked and defenseless on the block. They learned to do the "procedure" on other enslaved women: they did this in the name of Science. They found a use for it on white women . . . They wrote in their medical journals that they'd finally found a cure for the white woman's hysteria (*Possessing* 188).

Women, Black and/or White, no matter the race, have had to stand against the oppression by men, Black and/or White. Black women were used as instruments, whereas White women, in Victorian England, were treated from their hysteria by removing their genitals. Aware of this fact, "[Tashi] saw the healthy green leaves of [her] America falling seared to the ground. Her sparkling rivers muddy with blood" (*Possessing* 187).

The opposition of Africa versus America serves to emphasize the duality Walker deals with in *Possessing*. Although Africa is conceived as a place of pain and fear, and some African traditions are cruel and damaging rites that are harmful for women, there are also some African traditions that are praised and embraced. Through Tashi, Walker encourages Black people to celebrate those aspects of their culture that are positive for their gaining a true identity and progress, and to reject the detrimental ones. Tashi embodies the ambiguity of belonging to two cultures, African and American, and consequently the need of

adopting a critical perspective towards both cultures in order to construct her own self. Thus, in spite of her initial praise, as seen above, we may recall her disappointment with America when she finds out about the "sewed-up" women (*Possessing* 186-90). Her disappointment with America is paralleled by her disappointment with Africa on her return to that continent. Tashi remembers her arrival to her homeland in the following way:

> And when the plane touched down all I saw were the billboards shouting out to the people that they must buy Fanta and Coca-Cola and Datsuns and Fords and chocolate and whiskey and sugar and more sugar and coffee and more coffee and tea and more tea. And I thought: Of course! This excrement is the reading matter of the masses. I am only one old and crazy woman, but I will fling myself against the billboards. I will compete (*Possessing* 109-10).

So, in order to resist and fight, to compete, in her own words, her powerlesness due to circumcision, Tashi embraces the tradition of storytelling which leads her to her final act of liberation, as we shall see. Thus, Africa is not only conceived as death, but also as the embodiment of an opposition: fear and hate versus trust and love. Tashi needs to define what she trusts and loves about Africa in order to forsake and deny what she fears and hates. What she praises is the oral tradition, which is the way "she express[es] herself". In this regard, Evelyn talks about her "lifelong tendency to escape from reality into the realm of fantasy and storytelling" (*Possessing* 132). In spite of having used storytelling as a means of escaping from reality throughout her life, it is when she becomes aware of the abuse and humiliation she has suffered, and of her sexual and spiriual death that she really needs this tradition: "My fantasy life, without it I'm afraid to exist" (*Possessing*

36). This tradition becomes, then, an instrument of survival and both her African and American selves need it to resist oppression.

Aside from the opposition of Africa versus America, Walker also deals with another opposition: the individual versus the community. Tashi, in fact, is presented as a woman whose life has been destroyed by the performance of a ritual upon her body. A ritual is a means by which a community identifies and constructs itself. Therefore, the individual surrenders to the rituals in order to belong to his/her community. She first surrenders to tradition but her own awareness of the harm caused by her African community's ritual, her questioning and blaming it, leads to her healing and unification of body and self.

Tashi, who was not circumcised at the proper age as a girl, submits to the tradition when she becomes a young woman. Locating the narration in times of a revolution, when her people are fighting for independence, Tashi, defenceless and unable to stand against it, is overwhelmed by the pressure of her community. In order to end with African oppression by the White man, the Olinka are encouraged to hold on to their traditions and customs, by the words of the anonymous Leader that appears in the novel. The Leader, who "was Jesus Christ to [them]" (*Possessing* 117), claims: "We must take our land back . . . That we must return to the purity of our own culture and traditions" (*Possessing* 117). Accordingly, maintaing their culture is "the way the Olinka can show they still have their own ways, even though the White man has taken everything else" (*Possessing* 1). Men and women are not considered as individuals but as members of the larger community they are inmersed in. The Leader encouraged women to keep themselves clean and pure as they had always been "by cutting out unclean parts of our bodies" (*Possessing* 121).

Consequently, Tashi, in a time of proclamation of cultural independence, influenced by the words of their Leader, decides to proclaim her belonging to the Olinka community by going through scarification and circumcision. She felt the need to be part of and accepted by her community by going through such rite. Tashi gets the characteristic marks on her face because "[the Leader] had the same markings, and was proud of them" (*Possessing* 118):

> I saw the children, potbellied and with dying eyes, which made them look very wise. I saw the old people laid out in the shade of the rocks, barely moving on their piles of rags. I saw the women making stew out of bones. 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. (*Possessing* 23-4)

And so, Tashi undergoes the rite of initiation into womanhood as a way of affirming her African origin and demonstrating the attachment to her people's traditions.[22] M'Lissa, the *tsunga*, affirms that "[Tashi] had come to her wanting the operation because she recognized it as the only remaining definitive stamp of Olinka tradition" (*Possessing* 64). Circumcised, Tashi feels "the operation she'd done to herself joined her to these women, whom she envisioned as strong... Completely woman. Completely African" (*Possessing* 64). Paradoxically, she gives up the opportunity of becoming a true woman in order to be accepted as a female by her people. Facing a powerful community, the individual is compelled to fulfil the community's aim, even if it means rejecting his/her own aims. The

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22 As a girl, Tashi and her mother had been very close to the African American missionaires (Adam's family), and thus, subjected to criticism and repulse on the part of the Olinka.

individual becomes an object manipulated by the community's will and beliefs. So, Tashi is overcome by society and she first surrenders to tradition, which imply her annihilation as an individual. Her awareness, however, and questioning of the harm caused by her African community's ritual leads to her healing and unification of body and self. Through several steps, she will be able to confront society, claiming her individuality in order to reach self-identity.

Having been an object in the community's hands, and after several visits to various psychologists, who motivate her to talk freely, Tashi is able to start her own healing. After years of grief, self-imposed isolation, and self-destruction, Tashi starts to remember and to talk about her life of terror, and, consequently, to exorcise her fears. One of the burdens carried throughout her life has been her sister's death. Although the subject of her sister's death is described later in the novel, hints are given since the beginning of the novel, which indicate that the experience of that death has been distressing for her. Olivia, Adam's sister, in her first entry, remembers how Tashi stood out among the people who were welcoming the missionaries because she was crying. The reason is still unknown to the reader. Tashi, in the following entry, talks to the psychiatrist about her sister Dura and her death. Why she died, though, will not be revealed until later in the narration. Dura had bled to death when Tashi was only a child. She witnessed her death but had laid it aside in her unconscious. Dura died during the ceremony of circumcision practised by M'Lissa: "She'd bled and bled and bled and then there was death. No one was responsible. No one to blame" (*Possessing* 83).[23] Tashi, powerless to comprehend the enormity of the cruelty

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23 Besides the mutilation, the severe haemorrhage, the infections women are exposed to after their circumcision operation, through Dura's death, Walker demonstrates that such practise can lead women to death.

implicit in such ceremony, "forgot why the sight of her own blood terrified her" (*Possessing* 84). Tashi starts to formulate her own healing when she acknowledged that her sister's death was actually a murder: "I took a deep breath and exhaled it against the boulder blocking my throat. I remembered my sister Dura's *murder*[24]" (*Possessing* 83). The question that harasses Tashi now is that the person who had practised Dura's and her own circumcision is a woman. Bent on revenge against this old woman whom she holds responsible for Dura's death and for her own life of physical and emotional pain, Tashi decides to go back to Africa. Her decision to return to Africa is both a physical and psychological journey from victimization to consciousness, which will lead to her confrontation with society. Such confrontation, represented through the character of M'Lissa, the woman who had practised her circumcision, will lead her to recover her self-esteem and to survival. Thus, Walker maintains a recurrent theme in the novels of Black women writers.[25]

M'Lissa embodies a duality parallel to that of Africa: she is praised and hated. With this character, Walker retakes the Black stereotype of the "old mammy", which is a recurrent motif in African American literature. The "old mammy" is characterized by her sacrificial service to her people and her yearning for a better life for her daughters.[26] In *Possessing*, however, the "old mammy" figure conveys a contradiction. On the one hand, M'Lissa, who during the years Tashi spends in America becomes a national figure "for her unfailing adherence to

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24 Italic form appears on Walker's text.

25 See Deborah E. McDowell, "New Directions for Black Feminist Criticism", *The New Feminist Criticism*. Ed. by Elaine Showalter. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985).

26 Sondra O'Neale, "Inhibiting Midwifes, Usurping Creators. The Struggling Emergence of Black Women in American Fiction", *Feminist Studies. Critical Studies*. Ed. by Teresa de Lauretis. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), p. 146.

the ancient customs and traditions of the Olinka state" (*Possessing* 149), is recognized as "the Grandmother" of the race" (*Possessing* 163), as a racial and cultural symbol. On the other, M'Lissa's role in the community is the performance of a ritual that mutilates and inflicts pain upon women's bodies and lives. She is said to be "a link with the past for [Olinka people]" (*Possessing* 154), and is worshipped as the contributor to the perpetuity of the culture and traditions of their race (*Possessing* 149-55).

By means of the contradiction shown in M'Lissa, Walker is actually deconstructing an African and African American myth. Bearing in mind Walker's alluded duality of praising and rejecting her people's myths and traditions, through the character of M'Lissa, she rejects her negative connotations, but praises her value as a link with the past. Thus, M'Lissa is presented not only as the *tsunga*, the circumciser, who inflicts pain on Tashi's body and life, but also as a storyteller, whose stories will contribute to the reunification of Tashi's self. On her return to Africa, Tashi acknowledges that ". . . each morning, like the storyteller Scheherazade, M'Lissa told [her] another version of reality of which [she] had not heard" (*Possessing* 208). Tashi's visits to M'Lissa are viewed as "this coming back to care for the elderly [which] was such a strong characteristic of the ancient traditions" (*Possessing* 161). In doing so, and recalling Walker's belief in the importance for Black women to know about their past and culture, Tashi will learn more about her community and herself. In M'Lissa, then, two traditions conjoin, mutilation and storytelling, and we see again how the author deconstructs an African tradition, mutilation, through an African and African American tradition, storytelling.

Through her visits to M'Lissa, Tashi, as mentioned above, learns more about the brutal practise that ruined her life, its origin and defenders. M'Lissa, the

practitioner, has lead also a tortured life: she was also circumcised as a girl.[27] But her sorrow is due to her recognition of the pain she has inflicted on other girls:

> Dragging my half-body wherever half a body was needed. In service to tradition to what makes us a people. In service to the country and what makes who we are. But who are we but tortures of children? (*Possessing* 226).

Due to the confrontation with Tashi, M'Lissa is able to exorcise her fears as well. She confesses Duras's death to Tashi:

> The child who went into the initiation hut, she says. You know I left her there bleeding on the floor, and I came out. She was crying. She felt so betrayed. By everyone. They'd severely beaten her mother as well, and she blamed herself for this. M'Lissa sighed. I couldn't think about her anymore. I would have died. So I walked away, limped away, and just left her there. M'Lissa paused. Her voice when she continues is a whisper, amazed. She is still crying. She's been crying since I left. No wonder I haven't been able to. She has been crying all over tears (*Possessing* 225).

M'Lissa admits to have contributed to the physical and emotional destruction of girls. Aware of the harm she had caused, though, M'Lissa had not been able to

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[27] By means of the description of M'Lissa's circumcision, Walker shows again the cruelty of the performance, as M'Lissa remembers: "She took the outer lips . . . and of course the inner lips too. But [my mother] tried to leave me a nub . . . She barely nicked me there. But the other women saw. What my mother started, the witchdoctor finished . . . He showed no mercy. In fright and unbearable pain my body bucked under the razorsharp stone he was cutting me with" (*Possessing* 221-22).

face society and put an end to this practice. At the moment of her own circumcision, she knew that women are alone in the world:

> I knew in the moment when the pain was greatest, when it reached a crescendo, as when a loud metal drum is struck with a corresponding metal stick, that there is no God known to man who cares about children or about women. And that the God of woman is autonomy (*Possessing* 223).

Although being aware of her guilt, she held on to tradition, in spite of not understanding women's unquestioning adherence to tradition: "And the women, even today, after giving birth, they come back to the *ɔwuŋga* to be resewn, tighter than before. Because if it is loose [her man] won't receive enough pleasure" (*Possessing* 223-4). The power of the social conventions is also represented through Tashi's mother. Through M'Lissa, Tashi learns that her mother encouraged her daughter Dura to have the operation done, bacause "If Dura [was] not bathed, she said, no one [would] marry her" (*Possessing* 257).

M'Lissa, as already explained, becomes of vital importance for Tashi's survival. Paradoxically, the woman who once emotionally murdered her (throughout the novel Tashi feels herself dead), will be her passage to freedom and life. Through M'Lissa's teachings, Tashi learns that circumcision is a means by which men control women. Both Tashi and M'Lissa realize that they have been two instruments in a male game for power. As M'Lissa says:

> They sent for me, you know, just as they sent for you. They were constructing a traditional Olinkan village from which to fight, and therefore needed a *ɔwuŋga*.

> They sent for me?
> To give the *tsunga* something to do. To give the new community a symbol of its purpose.
> Which I became, I say, dumbstruck.
> Which you became, M'Lissa hisses. Lying on your mat of straw, making other little mats of straw. The same your great-great-grandmother would have done! (*Possessing* 243-44).

Tashi comprehends that she has been an object manipulated by a patriarchal society. And so, she understands why Dura's death was hidden from everyone from outside their community. On Adam's family's arrival, people kept telling her " *You mustn't cry* "[28] (*Possessing* 15), so as to avoid inquiries about the reason for that little girl's weeping. Although she still was a girl, Tashi did not grasp women's behaviour, and cries out: "How could I believe these were the same women I'd known all my life? The same women who'd known Dura? And whom Dura had known?" (*Possessing* 15). Tashi remebers those women's words:

> There are new people coming to live among us, and to meet them in tears is to bring bad luck to us. They'll think we beat you! Yes, we understand your sister is dead, but... time now to put on a good face and make the foreigners welcome. If you can't behave, we will have to ask your mother to take you elsewhere (*Possessing* 15).

Tashi becomes aware that women follow without hesitation the rules imposed by a patriarchal society, even if it means the negation of their grief for the death of someone they love. She remembers how their Leader wanted Olinka people to stick to tradition in order to show their love for him and their "Desperate need to

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[28] Italic form appears on Walker's text.

show [their] remembrance and love of [their] Leader in everything [they] did", (*Possessing* 116).

The Leader's "acceptance of violence as a means to the end of African oppression" is associated with the practise of circumcision which is in itself an act of violence on women's bodies. Circumcision and facial scarification are facts that symbolize submission to the traditions and rules of the dominant power.[29] The story of Torabe's wife,[30] personifies the brutal sexual oppression women are subjected to, which is institutionalized by society. Torabe's wife run away from him because "he had cut her open with a hunting knife on their wedding night, and gave her no opportunity to heal" (*Possessing* 138). Not finding support and comfort in her family, "Because she was Torabe's wife, her place was with him, her mother told her" (*Possessing* 138), she drowned herself in the river. After her death, Torabe was thrown out of the village because he lost control of his wife, because "[he] threatened the fabric of the web of life" (*Possessing* 139). Torabe's story symbolizes the "connection between mutilation and enslavement that is at the root of the domination of women in the world" (*Possessing*, 139)[31] Consequently, as personified in Tashi's experience, women are manipulated with erroneous beliefs of cultural and racial identity, which imply the perpetuation of their customs and traditions as a sign of their identity and independence from the

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[29] Wendy Wall, "Lettered Bodies and Corporeal Texts in *The Color Purple*", *Studies in American Fiction* (Spring, 1988), p. 86.

[30] Torabe is an old Olinka man whom, repudiated by his community, Adam used to take care of.

[31] In the novel, Lisette, Adam's lover, is the person who tells Torabe's story. This fact is another example of the empathy Walker wants to establish between Tashi and everyone who listens to or hears about her story. In this case, Lisette never has the opportunity to talk to Tashi, but her story, which she knows through Adam, affects her in such a way that she tries to help Tashi. Not able to, because of Tashi's resentment towards her, Lisette tells her son, Pierre, the story, so that Tashi's story will not fall into oblivion.

colonial masters. Quoting from *The Color Purple*, scarification and body rituals are performed as a means of "carving their identification as a people into their children's faces".[32]

According to Henry Louis Gates, Jr., the theme of oppression of Blacks by Blacks does not have a long history as a subject for representation,[33] although oppression has been one of the greatest concerns of Black fiction. In *Possessing*, though, the oppression of Blacks by Blacks becomes Walker's subject matter. Walker alludes to the responsibility of the Black community on the victimization of Black women. The novel is not concerned with the oppression suffered by Black people under White domination, although it is located at the time when African countries were fighting for their independence, but with Black women's sexual victimization, institutionalized by Black patriarchy, which, in the name of tradition, abused them and mutilated their bodies and selves. However, Walker herself sees images of female victimization worldwide, which reveal that women are victimized no matter the race. Lisette, Tashi's husband's French lover, acknowledges:

> It is in all the movies that terrorrize women . . . The man who breaks in. The man with the knife . . . But those of us whose chastity belt was made of leather, or of silk and diamonds, or or fear and not of our own flesh... we worry. We are the perfect audience, mesmerized by our unconscious knowledge of what men, in the collaboration of our mothers, do to us (*Possessing* 139).

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32 Alice Walker, *The Color Purple*, p. 214.

33 Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and K. A. Appiah, *Alice Walker. Critical Perspectives. Past and Present*. (New York: Amistad, 1993), p. xi.

Walker is engaged in deconstructing the patriarchal order "that maintains power by forcing the female body into a position of powerlesness",[34] and which denies the woman's ability to shape an identity. Consequently, by questioning African traditions, Walker questions all the traditions that inflict suffering on women and which are still maintained in societies all over the world. Adam says about the Olinka people: "They do not want to hear what their children suffer. They've made the telling of the suffering itself taboo" (*Possessing* 165). Walker claims that the girls and women who are submitted to cruel and damaging tradition are the ones that should break up this taboo and fight for their own identity. Tashi, who in the beginning says that "[she] could not fight with the wound tradition had given [her]" (*Possessing* 122), becomes aware that she actually has to fight and resist in spite of the wound inflicted on her by the patriarchal tradition.

Barbara Christian states: "Black community itself becomes a major threat to the survival and empowerment of women. The Black community, its customs and mores, affects the process of Black woman's exploration of self"[35] Christian's statement is partially applicable to Walker's beliefs. Walker claims the responsibility of the Black community in the sufferings of Black women who are sexually abused and mutilated, but she also believes that some aspects of Black culture are essential for those women's survival. Having in mind Walker's duality of praise and rejection, Tashi resists the oppressive situation she has been through, due to her submission to circumcision, by means of her adherence to an ancient Black tradition, that of storytelling. Furthermore, although having been

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34 Wendy Wall, "Lettered Bodies and Corporeal Texts in *The Color Purple* ". *Studies in American Fiction*, p. 83.

35 Barbara Christian, "Trajectories of Self-Definition: Placing Contemporary Afro-American Women's Fiction" (1983), *Black Feminist Criticism . Perspectives on Black Women Writers*: (New York: Pergamon Press, 1985), p. 177.

recognized as being more compassionate with her female than male characters,[36] in *Possessing*, Walker portrays male characters --Adam, Benny and Pierre-- who are deeply involved in Tashi's sufferings, and firmly committed to help Tashi in her journey towards liberation.

Along this journey, each of the three selves appears separately at first , as a means of mirrorring Tashi's internal conflict. With every step forward taken in her process of integration, Evelyn and Tashi join together. It is when she deconstrusts tradition and questions her community that she is able to start reconstructing her fragmented self. Thus, Tashi acknowledges that "It is only the cruelty of truth, speaking it, shouting it, that will save us now" (*Possessing* 120). Tashi blames her community for her suffering: "White is not the culprit this time. Bring me out paper of the colors of our flag" (*Possessing* 106). Finally, she becomes able to resist those rituals that have mutilated her body and self in the name of tradition: "If you lie to yourself about your own pain, you will be killed by those who claim you enjoyed it" (*Possessing* 108). Furthermore, she also achieves the reconciliation with her body, as she herself confirms it: "I have the uncanny feeling that, just at the end of my life, I am beginning to reinhabit the body I long ago left" (*Possessing* 110). Having accomplished the reconstruction of her self and the reconciliation with her body, her three selves, Tashi, Evelyn and Mrs. Johnson, have become just one. Therefore, the reunified Tashi-Evelyn-Mrs.Johnson, as she appears in the novel, becomes able to commit her final act of liberation, the murder of M'Lissa, the woman who long ago sexually and emotionally killed her. In the trial, she confesses her guilt. She says "loud and clear so there could be no mistake: I did it" (*Possessing* 267).

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[36] See Bernard Bell, *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition*. (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1987), p. 261.

But even this act of killing the *tsunga*, evidences the constant ambiguity in *Possessing*. Tashi kills M'Lissa because "hers was an evil power, barely acquainted, any longer, with good" (*Possessing* 255), but also because somebody has to fulfill the ancient tradition according to which a "well-appreciated *tsunga*" had to be killed by a woman she circumcised (*Possessing* 276). Tashi, then, carried out what was expected of her.

Finally, Tashi-Evelyn-Mrs. Johnson acknowledges that the telling of her lifestory leads to her discovery that, through words and actions, **RESISTANCE IS THE SECRET OF JOY** (*Possessing* 281). About to be executed, her last words are "I am no more. And satisfied" (*Possessing* 281). Tashi senses her death as a means of liberation. Hers is a liberating death.

I.V.- THE BLENDING OF VOICE, BODY AND TEXT AS A MEANS OF LIBERATION.

The conection between freedom and storytelling is a recurrent motif in African American literature since the time of slavery. In this regard, Henry Louis Gates Jr. asserts:

> The relation between freedom and literacy became a motif in African American literature, from ex-slaves such as Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs to modern novelists such as Zora Neale Hurston and Ralph Ellison, or Ishmael Reed, Alice Walker, and Toni Morrison.[1]

Ex-slaves reported in their narratives about the manner in which they learned to read and write in order to gain individual freedom.[2] Modern novelists have also incorporated this theme in their writings. Zora Neale Hurston, for example, in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, empowers her main character Janie and her friend Phoeby to liberate themselves through storytelling.[3]

Alice Walker also assumes such connection between freedom and literacy, and understands storytelling as a means of liberation. In *The Color Purple*, the central character's liberation comes through writing. Walker represents Celie's

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[1] Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "Introduction: Narration and Cultural Memory in the African American Tradition", *Talk That Talk. An Anthology of African American Storytelling*. Ed. by. Linda Goss and Marian E. Barnes (New York: Simon & Schuster Inc., 1989), p. 16.

[2] See Chapter One, pp. 6-7.

[3] Only Hurston is pointed out because of her great influence on Alice Walker's work. Other authors, such as Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, Ernest Gaines, Ronald Fair, William Melvin Kelley, might be mentioned as well. See Bernard Bell, "The Roots of the Early Afro-American Novel", *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition*. (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1987), p. 25.

growth of self-consciousness as an act of writing. Through her letters, through the writing of her story, Celie learns to reshape those forces of oppression that have dominated and abused her, and emerges from the domination and abuse of man to a liberated and autonomous self. In *Possessing The Secret of Joy*, Walker symbolizes the central character's liberation as an act of storytelling. Through the telling of her story, Tashi will be able to reconstruct her identity and reconcile herself with her body, which --both identity and body-- have been destroyed by the enactment of female circumcision. So, Walker's use of first person narration is a technique of reconstructing the self.

As mentioned in Chapter Two, in a note to the reader at the end of the novel, referring to the connections between *Possessing the Secret of Joy* and her previous two books, *The Color Purple* (1982) and *The Temple of my Familiar* (1989), Walker states: "I have claimed the storyteller's prerogative to recast or slightly change events alluded to or described in the earlier books, in order to emphasize and enhance the meaning of the present tale" (*Possessing* 283-4). Therefore, Walker grants herself and Tashi, the main character, the role of storytellers, and conceives Tashi's story as a tale. Tashi, then, is bestowed with the storytellers's power to relate her own life as a physical and emotional mutilated woman and her final liberation.

Tashi's (Walker's) narrative follows the patterns of storytelling and embodies some of the elements of traditional storytelling. Consequently, as it will be discussed later, the composition of this tale is characterized by a non-chronological discourse, which is emphasized by the circularity of the narrative

time, and by the confluence of realism, imagination and symbolism. Moreover, the narrative equates body and self with text.

Possessing is a weaving of non-chronological events whose action takes place in three different continents: Africa, America and Europe. The plot, however, is set during the taking place of an African trial: Tashi, born African but now an American citizen, is being judged for the murder of M'Lissa, an old-aged African woman who had practised her circumcision; she is finally found guilty and senteced to death. Besides this main setting, there are other settings where the action also takes place. Thus, appropriating the storyteller's licences, Tashi's narrative takes the reader back and forth in time, from continent to continent, from the African court to the prison where she is being kept, to her American home, to the Olinka village where she spent her childhood, and to the different psychiatrists' offices where she is being treated. Tashi's voice is not only limited to her testimony in court, but it is also relayed as confessions to the psychiatrists --first Carl Jung in Switzerland,[4] then to an African American woman in the United States--, as talks with her family, and as her most inner thoughts. These continuous alternations of present and past tenses originate narrative fissures in the text, since details of Tashi's story are introduced early but not developed till later. Therefore, Tashi's is not a linear but a fragmented narrative, symbolizing Tashi's physical and emotional dismemberment, which

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[4] The doctor, whom Tashi calls *Mzee* (Old Man), is supposedly Carl Jung. At Olivia's request, and after years of unsuccessful treatments in mental hospitals in the United States, Tashi visits a psychiatrist, who is not "the father of psychoanalysis . . . but one of his sons, whose imitation of him, she says, --including dark hair and beard, Egyptian statuettes on his desk, the tribal-rug-covered couch and the cigar, which smells of bitterness-- will perhaps cure me" (*Possessing* 11).

creates splits within herself, as discussed in Chapter Three, and confirming the previously alluded equation of body and self with text.

The numerous time alternations also contribute to the mentioned circularity of the tale. The story starts and ends up in the African prison. Although the narrative time takes Tashi's last moments of life, the actual narration comprises her whole life. Tashi starts her narration as an old woman waiting for her execution with her acknowledgement of having been dead for a long time (*Possessing* 3), and, after presenting her lifestory from her childhood in Africa, her adulthood in America, and her return to Africa, finishes it in prison again when she is about to be executed. Her last words are: "I am no more. And satisfied" (*Possessing* 281). After confirming her emotional death, Tashi takes the reader along her life journey which ends with her physical death. At the same time, Tashi is the linking device between other participants of her story who are introduced and who reveal more details about her life. Her narrative, then, becomes a communal experience since these characters are actually narrators telling the same story from different points of view, which enriches Tashi's own story. Their voices are relayed as letters, as confessions to the psychiatrists, and as testimony in the court in which Tashi is being judged. Although they do not follow a set order, this group of voices contribute to blur those previously mentioned narratives fissures in Tashi's act of telling, since they are blended in with her story, through which the narration acquires a sense of entirity. Through this polyvocal narrative, which characterizes traditional storytelling, Tashi will be able to resist and fight the tradition of circumcision and reach wholeness.

In Walker's (Tashi's) narrative realism and symbolism merge. This is due to the paradox of portraying a harsh subject matter, that of female circumcision and its aftereffects,[5] within the frame of storytelling. A realistic narrative and a symbolic narrative converge in the text. By doing so, the author stresses on the fact that Tashi's story is drawn out from reality and is firmly rooted in the experience of todays's women.[6]

Walker emphasizes her focus on female genital mutilation by choosing a realistic mode of fiction when dealing directly with the operation and its after-effects. Thereby, the passages related with the operation are characterized by their violence and cruelty.[7] Walker insists on the harshness of the operation, women's impossibility of consummating sexual intercouse, the unhygienic conditions under which circumcision is performed that may even cause death, and the long lasting physical and emotional consequences.[8] The description of

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5 In an interview with Evelyn C. White, Walker exposes the bloody ritual on which female circumcision is performed, and its damaging effects, such as severe hemorrhaging that may lead to death, chronic infections, sexually transmitted diseases, and emotional trauma. Evelyn C. White, "AliceWalker's Compassionate Crusade", *Sojourner*. *The Women's Forum* 19:7 (March 1994).

6 In the above mentioned interview, Walker explains she first heard about female circumcision during her first visit to Africa in 1965. Haunted by such ritual operation, determined to expose its unhealthy and traumatic effects, Walker, in collaboration with British-Indian filmmaker Pratibha Parmar, produced *Warrior Marks*. Filmed in California, England, Senegal, Gambia and Burkina Faso, the film portrays the lives of African women in such continent and among African and Asian communities in America and Europe.

7 See Chapter Three where the operation and its damaging physical and emotional effects are discussed.

8 In this regard, Eva Lennox-Birch states that "*Possessing the Secret of Joy* is less discursive, more economic and concentrated than any of [Walker's] previous novels, in its focus upon one issue and the consequences it had for a woman and her close family". Eva Lennox-Birch, "Alice Walker (b. 1944). The Spiritual Inheritance", *Black American Women's Writing*. *A Quilt of Many Colors*. (Hertfordshire: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994), p. 238.

M'Lissa's circumcision consequences, for example, is a poignant passage, as these lines reveal:

> [Tashi] saw why [M'Lissa] was lame. Not only had her clitoris, outer and inner labia, and every other scrap of flesh been removed, but a deep gash traveled right through the tendon of her inner thigh. That was why, when walking, she had to drag her left leg. It was supported by the back tendon and the buttock muscles alone. Indeed, the left buttock was far more developed than the right, and even though she hadn't really walked with vigor in many years, there was a firm resilience in her flesh on that side (*Possessing* 217).

Walker's blunt and direct way of representing circumcision is due to her attempt to reach the reader directly and make him/her realize that Tashi's story and other women's stories in the novel are not fictional but real facts. She reinforces her idea by reminding the reader that millions of women throughout the world undergo Tashi's same experience nowadays. Walker's reminder comes at the afterword to the novel, which it is more effective because it shocks the reader into the awareness that Tashi's fictional experience is a daily occurence for some women today. Recalling Artaud's notion of theatre, discussed in Chapter Three, Walker manages to make the reader feel those women's pain in his/her own flesh.

As mentioned, realistic and fictional elements merge in Walker's novel. In spite of Walker's painful subject-matter and her realistic mode of fiction when presenting it, the manner and style of the narrative are not realistic. Claiming the storyteller's prerogative (*Possessing* 283-4), Walker introduces imaginary and symbolic elements in her tale, as a means of blurring the boundaries between

reality and fantasy. Thus, the main action takes place, alternately, in Africa, North America and Europe. In this last continent, the narration moves from London to Switzerland. On the contrary, where the action takes place in North America is not clearly mentioned. In Africa, though, the action is located in an imaginary African community Walker has created: the Olinka community.[9] Therefore, the narration switches from real to imaginary settings. Moreover, in spite of locating Tashi's story in the present time,[10] *Possessing* is a compound of dialogues, thoughts, dreams, flashbacks, symbols and images which enlarge the narrative time. The border between reality and fantasy becomes narrower due to the blending of Tashi's lifestory and her imagination. Walker not only takes her narrative into taboo territory because of the focus upon female circumcision, but also into areas of the female soul which usually are dominated by silence and fear. So, besides the real and imaginary settings, Walker's narrative also switches from the real to imaginary situations, that are happening within Tashi's mind. Tashi's narrative moves from what surrounds her to her mind, from her mind to the outer world, from the outside to the inside, and from the inside to the outside. Thus,

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[9] Mentioned already in Chapter Two, in the afterword to the novel, Walker openly says: "I have created Olinka as my village and the Olinkans as one of my ancient, ancestral tribal peoples" (*Possessing* 285). She also affirms to have made up some African words used in the novel, such as *tsunga*, *MbeleAché*. As seen in Chapter Two, creating the Olinka community and such African words make Walker feel more connected with her people.

[10] In the novel, the characters read the magazine *Newsweek*, and a whole floor of the prison where Tashi is being kept is dedicated to AIDS patients. Moreover, Olivia remembers: "Tashi is convinced that the little girls who are dying, and the women too, are infected by the unwashed, unsterilized sharpstones, 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. The opening that is made will never enlarge on its own, but must always be forced. Because of this, infections and open sores are commonplace" (*Possessing* 251-2). Therefore, Walker suggests the fact that female genital mutilation, due to the unhygienic conditions in which it is practised, is one of the reasons for the AIDS epidemic across the African continent (*Possessing* 251-2).

from the harsh environment that encircles her, Tashi retreats into her mind where she creates a world in which she functions and feels safe. In these "safe spaces, as Sondra O'Neale states, and empowered through self-definition, Black women resist the dominant ideology".[11] It is actually, through such safe spaces and her voice, that Tashi is able to exorcise her innermost fears and face oppression. It is also in these safe spaces within her mind where Tashi discloses, as it will be seen, the oppositions that confront her, such as death versus life, and Tashi versus Evelyn.

Tashi's narrative is characterized by the parallelism she establishes between her life and her imagination. Tashi's narration is about her life as a mutilated and abused woman, but it is combined with her innermost thoughts and emotions, which allow for a deep insight into her mind. Walker's narrative reaches those areas of the female self which are usually conceiled by silence, fear and anguish. Her narrative penetrates into the safe spaces where the female reveals herself freely and feels secure. Consequently, by means of such deep insight into her mind, Tashi discloses her fragmentation in different personalities and the oppositions such fragmentation involves, which are presented through a fragmented text. Tashi's narrative not only discloses her internal conflict, but also focuses on her body, the site of violence. The brutal mutilation the female body has been submitted to and the fractured self such mutilation causes is parallelled by a fragmented text. There is, then, a correlation between the female body and

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[11] Sondra O'Neale, "Inhibiting Midwifes, Usurping Creators: The Struggling Emergence of Black Women in American Fiction", *Feminist Studies. Critical Studies*. Ed. by Teresa de Lauretis. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), p. 139.

the text. The text is marked by the body which becomes the primary source of imagery.

That Tashi's narrative penetrates into her mind is obvious since the beginning of her story. Her first entry reveals her deepest emotions: "I did not realize for a long time that I was dead" (*Possessing* 3). Such acknowledgement, she says, reminds her of a story, which parallels her own (*Possessing* 3-5). A young panther feels distressed because her husband and her cowife do not love her. Bound by social conventions, she has to live with them, although she is unloved. Not finding her place in society, and underestimating herself due to her lack of love, she spends the days listening to her inner voice. In this safe space she creates within her mind and starting to care for herself, the young panther drowns herself when she "kissed her own reflection in the water, and held the kiss all the way to the bottom of the stream" (*Possessing* 5). In both cases, Tashi's and the panther's, it is a liberating death.[12] The reader is, then, witnessing how Tashi adopts the role of a storyteller and how she functions in those safe spaces. Tashi herself admits "[her] lifelong tendency to escape from reality into the realm of fantasy and storytelling" (*Possessing* 132). So, it is when she finds herself in that "realm of fantasy and storytelling" that she feels secure and safe from what surrounds her: "if I find myself way off into an improbable tale, imagining it or telling it, then I can guess something horrible has happened to me and that I can't bear to think about it" (*Possessing* 132). So, in court, for example, she flies away with her imagination and escapes from her bitter reality:

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[12] See Chapter Three, p. 61.

> I float up to the stand and hove, a large dragonfly, in front of [Mbati] . . . I take her smooth hand in mine. Her eyes widen: with wonder; with delight. Come, I say to her, smiling, I am your mother. If you take my hand before all of these people, all of these judges, all of these policemen and warders and rubbernecks in the audience, you will discover that the two of us can fly. Really? she asks, placing her other hand also in mine. I tug gently and she leaves her seat and floats beside me over the railing of the witness stand, over the attorneys' tables, over the heads of the packed courtroom . . . out the door and into the sky. We are lighter than air, lighter than thistle. Mother and daughter heading for the sun (*Possessing* 159-60).

Tashi's narrative starts within her inside and moves on to the outside and back to the inside, as details about her experience are introduced little by little in her narrative. So, Tashi is not only telling the story of her life but also those stories that take place within her mind.

The opening sentence to the novel, already mentioned, reveals much of Tashi's internal conflict: "I did not realize for a long time that I was dead" (*Possessing* 3). Guilty of murder and waiting for the day of her execution, Tashi does not feel dead now that her death is so close in time. Unable to show any emotions and any feelings, incapacitated for sexual pleasure, and, thus, having her sexual self annihilated,[13] Tashi has felt death inside most of her life. Since the time she undergoes circumcision, her whole life changes. "That [Tashi's] soul had been dealt a mortal blow was plain to anyone who dared look into her eyes" (*Possessing* 66), Olivia remembers. Tashi recognizes that she is not dead, but "neither would [she] say [she is] fully alive" (*Possessing* 229). She also

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[13] In the preceeding Chapter, it was seen how Tashi refuses to have any sexual contact. As Adam remembers, "Tashi had run away from [me]. Even from [my] kisses" (*Possessing* 99).

acknowledges that "[she] [herself] ha[s] lived and died" (*Possessing* 156), when thinking of *Mzee*, the psychiatrist, and Lisette, her husband's French lover, who had already died. Because of her closeness to death, Tashi does not fear it. About *Mzee*, she affirms that "he looked as if he would soon die. [She] found this comforting" (*Possessing* 50). Taking into account what was discussed in Chapter Three, death is conceived not only as the end to her destroyed life, but also as the beginning to a liberated self. Therefore, Tashi's narrative is pervaded with images of death and life, as a means of symbolizing the ambiguity of being dead and alive at the same time.

The opposition of life versus death is constant throughout Tashi's narrative, due not only to her own experience as a circumcised woman, which impedes her from developing her sexuality, as seen in Chapter Three, but also to the fact that sexual intercourse conveys connotations of death in the society where the action tales place on. An example of this is the story told about a dry and dying land "caused long ago by a man and a woman fornicating there, when the area was planted in cereal grains" (*Possessing*220). In this regard, Adam also recognizes that Tashi and himself broke a strong Olinka taboo when, before circumcision, they used to make love in the fields, because "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" (*Possessing* 27). Therefore, sexual intercourse conveys the ambiguous relation between death and life. Such ambiguity is more acute in Tashi's representations of sexual intercouses and birth. Although Adam was her sexual partner in her youth (*Possessing* 27) and she experienced pleasure at that time (*Possessing* 32), her perception of love changes after the circumcision operation. Because of the pain involved in the sexual act,

Tashi completely renounces to her sexuality. Such pain leads her to see her sexuality as painful and cruel. Because of the small opening left in her vagina by the circumciser, the man, in order to penetrate her, needs to fight to enlarge the tiny aperture, which most of the times involves the tearing of flesh. Consequently, in Tashi's attempts of sexual intercourse, blood is a dominant factor. Blood is also a central element in her son's birth. As seen in Chapter Three, Tashi is cut open in order to make an opening large enough for Benny's head (*Possessing* 57).

Tashi associates blood on the one hand with pain and death, and on the other with life. Her own birth evidences this fact. The story of her birth was told to her by her mother: Tashi was not carried to due term, because her mother was once frightened by a leopard, which provoked Tashi's birth. A few days later, someone killed and skinned the leopard's cubs (*Possessing* 19-20). Tashi, assuming once again the role of a storyteller, represents this event in her own way, and associates blood on the one hand with pain and death, and on the other with life:

> *So that my mind too veered away from myself and my mother's ordeal and went off into the world of the leopard. Soon enough I could see her clearly, licking down her cubs, or having intercourse with her mate. There in the dappled shade of the acacias. Then, the sound of thunder cracking, and all her loved ones down in a flash. And she, to her shame, forced to run away in fear, even as she smelled the blood and saw the bodies sprawled ungracefully. And later, coming back, she would discover all those she loved, just as she'd left them, but stiffly dead and without their skins.*
> *And I could feel the horror in the leopard's heart, and the rage.*

> *And now I see a pregnant human appearing on the path, and I leap for her throat* (*Possessing* 20).[14]

Within her mind, Tashi compares her own and her mother's pain at giving birth with the leopard's grief when discovering her dead cubs.[15] For this factors, she remembers herself coming into the world surrounded by fear and grief, death and blood. Consequently, death and life pass joined in time, and the border between both cannot be established. This fact is reinforced by M'Lissa's presence in her own birth (*Possessing* 19), and in her sister's circumcision (*Possessing* 8-9; 75; 82-3; 225), who bled to death. M'Lissa's presence in both Tashi's birth and her sister's death enhances the idea of the midwife as a giver of life, but, also, as someone who deprives women of their emotional life. Moreover, as discussed in the previous chapter, M'Lissa also embodies the ambiguity of love and hate parallel to what Tashi senses for Africa: she is praised and hated at the same time. If we saw that Tashi celebrates her teachings, later we also see that M'Lissa's presence frightenes her, as her description of the old woman reveal:

> There was something sinister, though, about her aspect; but perhaps I was the only one likely to see it. Though her mouth was smiling, as were her sunken cheeks and her long nose, her wrinkled forehead and her scrawny neck, her beady eyes were not. Looking

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[14] Italic form appears on the text.

[15] Although not clearly mentioned, there are some hints throughout the book that suggest the notion that Tashi's mother had also been circumcised. As the Olinka women, she had the typical walk. Years later, Tashi would remember that when asking if hers had been an easy birth, her mother dared not to look at her eyes, "But she [would] only look over [Tashi's] head, to the side of [her] ear. Of course, she murmur[ed]. Of course you were" (*Possessing* 19).

> into them, suddenly chilled, I realized they never had (*Possessing* 150-1).

The duality between praise and rejection is also manifest in the description Tashi does of M'Lissa's room:

> [H]ere lies M'Lissa, propped like a queen in her snowy bed, the open window beside it looking out into a fragrant garden, and in the distance, above the garden, there is a blue mountain. She is radiant, and her forehead, nose, lips, teeth, cheeks smile at me. I bend to kiss the top of her head, her white hair a resistant brush against my lips. I take her hand, which has the feel of feathers, and stand a moment looking down at her. Her whole body is smiling . . . ; except her eyes. They are wary and alert . . . Hers is an x-ray gaze. But then, so is mine, now. What is that shadow, there in the depths? Is it apprehension? Is it fear? (*Possessing* 155).

So, the images of life, such as the "fragant garden", the "blue mountain", and M'Lissa's hand, which "has the feel of feathers", contrast with those images of death, as the "snowy bed", the "shadow . . . in the depths" of her room, and her "x-ray gaze". Within M'Lissa's character, then, merge life and death, love and hate.

Another image of death is the continuous references to Tashi's "lost children". "Can you bear to know what I have lost?" (*Possessing* 35), Tashi screams at the judges in court, "[b]ut most of all, she says, I scream it at my family: Adam, Olivia, Benny" (*Possessing* 35). Tashi has lost the capacity of

having children, of giving birth. Having experienced her son Benny's birth, fearing the tremendous pain, she refuses to have any kind of sexual intercourse. Not only is she unable to develop as a sexual self, but also, as a social self, since Tashi is denied of her role as a mother. In addition to that, her only child is a retarded boy. Her son's mental deficiency and her dread of making love, leads Tashi, in a metaphorical way, to abort pregnancies. About Mbati, the young woman who looks after M'Lissa in her deathbed, and who establishes a close friendship with her, Tashi says: "She is the daughter I should have had. Perhaps could have had, had I not aborted her out of fear" (*Possessing* 159).

Ruth D. Weston assures that "for abused women, the body can become the tomb of the mind".[16] So, the abused Tashi feels confined to her body, which, moreover, does not belong to her any more. Having lost control over her body, leads Tashi to take refuge in those safe spaces she creates within her mind. Her confinement within her body is parallel to her hate for close spaces. The safe spaces within her mind are parallel to her house, the only place where she feels safe. As seen in Chapter Three, Tashi isolates herself from the outer world. Her incapacity for loving, her powerlesness to relate to the outside, leads her to bury herself in life. The house, then, becomes a space of solitude, passivity and isolation, and, at the same time, a site of security. It also symbolizes the oppressive circle Tashi lives in. Her isolation is not a product of her will, but a consequence of the circumcision that has been performed on her. Her circumcision was practised out of context, since it was done when she was a teenager. Tashi remembers that for Dura's operation, the ritual was followed in

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[16] Ruth D, Weston, "Who Touches This Touches a Woman. The Naked Self in Alice Walker", *Weber Studies* (Spring/Summer), 1992, p. 52.

the traditional way (*Possessing* 9). Hers, however, is practised in a rebel camp, where herself and M'Lissa are the only women, and lacking the necessary hygienic conditions. Performed the operation in "[an] isolated hut from which came howls of pain and terror" (*Possessing* 75). From that moment Tashi fears close spaces. As told by Adam, she has a dream that terrifies her every night:

> There is a tower, she says. I think it is a tower. It is tall, but I am inside. I don't really ever know what it looks like from outside. It is cool at first, and as you descend lower and lower to where I'm kept, it becomes dank and cold, as well. It's dark. There is an endless repetitive sound that is like the faint scratch of a baby's fingernails on paper. And there are millions of things moving about me in the dark. I can not see them. And they've broken my wings! I see them lying crossed in a corner like discarded oars. Oh, and they're forcing something in one end of me. and from the other they are busy pulling something out. I am long and fat and the color of tobacco spit. Gross! And I can not move! (*Possessing* 26-7).

The tower becomes a representation of Tashi's physical and emotional imprisonment. Tashi fears close spaces, the tower, and mistrusts people ("they") who have broken her wings, referring to the society where the ritual operation is institutionalized. However, she does not fear *Mzee* bacause "[she] did not fear his house" (*Possessing* 52). The house, which "had at its center a stone hut,. . . with a large fireplace and flagstone hearth" (*Possessing* 52), reminded her, in a certain way of Africa, as well as the doctor, who due to his caring for her, reminded her of "an old African grandmother" (*Possessing* 52).

Having Tashi's body as the primary source of imagery, also emphasizes the already mentioned opposition: Africa versus America. The African born Tashi uses a more symbolic and animistic language that discloses her innermost thoughts, while the American Evelyn uses a more realistic language. Tashi's American self is the one which is able to separate itself from its African origin. Within an African society where it is taboo to speak about its women's sufferings as a consequence of female circumcision,[17] Tashi, as Evelyn in America, for example, is the one who recounts the traumatic experience of her son's birth (*Possessing* 57-8). While Tashi is able to push the "boulder", which impedes her to remember her sister's death,[18] off her mouth, Evelyn becomes able to openly speak about the operation done to her (*Possessing* 115-23). She says: "I am already pushing, and the boulder rolls off my tongue" (*Possessing* 120). Reminiscences of her childhood come to her mind:

> 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. I think they meant my labia majora. After all, none of them had vaginal lips; none of them had a clitoris; they had no idea what these things looked like; to them I was bound to look odd. There were a few other girls who had not been circumcised. The girls who had been would sometimes actually run from us, as if we were demons. Laughing, though. Always laughing (*Possessing* 121-2).

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[17] In this regard, Adam acknowledges that the Olinka community "ha[s] made the telling of the suffering itself taboo" (*Possessing* 165)

[18] See Chapter Three, p. 53.

So, after having internalized the fault as her own, Evelyn sees the fault in the dominant power represented by the figure of Their Leader, as seen in Chapter Three. She becomes, then, able to express outwardly her fears, symbolized through that "boulder" that "not only had rolled off [her] tongue but was rolling quite rapidly away from [her] toward the door" (*Possessing* 123).

For Tashi, on the contrary, it is harder to exorcise her fears and to define what part of her African origin is necessary for her present situation. Thus, in her narrative, she uses symbolism of the African and African American tradition, reflected in animal imagery, because Walker believes "[it] is the one thing that Afro-Americans have retained of their heritage".[19] The use of animals to represent Tashi's inner state and her deepest feelings becomes a recurrent device throughout her narrative. Tashi adopts different animal forms as a means of disclosing her emotions and as a means of creating bonds with her past. As already examined, Tashi starts her story by comparing herself with a panther who dies (*Possessing* 3-5). At her son's birth, which takes place in America, Tashi thinks she is listening to "the screaming of monkeys" (*Possessing* 59). Moreover, she strokes his head with her tongue, because "[she] instinctively felt [it] should be done with [her] tongue" (*Possessing* 61). After her own circumcision, Tashi feels like "a [dead] chicken bound for market" (*Possessing* 45). The image of a dead chicken emphasizes the alluded parallelism of death and life. She fears to be devoured and exposed to danger: "The scars on my face are nearly healed, but I must still fan the flies away. The flies that are attracted by the odor coming from

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[19] Bernard Bell, *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition*. (Amherst: the University of Massachusetts Press, 1987), p. 260.

blood, eager to eat at the feast provided by my wounds" (*Possessing* 45).[20] Again, like in her mental representation of her birth, Tashi sees herself surrounded by blood and pain, a fact that is reinforced due to the bad smell coming from her wounds.[21] Tashi sees herself as a "sacrificial chicken" and as a bird with "broken wings" imprisoned in the "Dark Tower", as a means of representing her mental and physical destruction. In the representation of her birth, already explained, Tashi sees "a leopard with two legs. [Her] terrified mother with four" (*Possessing* 54). So, the animal is humanized and the human being is dehumanized. Moreover, her journey to Africa is represented as the flight of a bird. Tashi asserts that she has the feeling "that [she] had flown direct, as if [she] were a bird, from [her] house to [M'Lissa's]" (*Possessing* 152). At the end of her life, Tashi sees herself as a "crow, flapping [her] wings unceasingly in [her] own head, cawing mutely across an empty sky. And [she] wore black, and black and black" (*Possessing* 224). Waiting for her execution, Tashi acknowledges she is like a "lamb for slaughter" (*Possessing* 275).

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[20] The image of the chicken also appears in Alexis DeVeaux's play *The Tapestry*. The protagonist feels as a "sacrificail chicken" about to be devoured and sacrificed by different pressures acting upon her. At a very critical point in her life, the main character needs to reconcile and define how much of her past and roots is necessary for her future life, while she tries to reveal herself as a whole woman.

[21] There is another image of a chicken in the novel. When remembering her sister's operation and Tashi says: "And then I saw M'Lissa shuffle out, dragging her lame leg, and at first I didn't realize she was carrying anything, for it was so insignificant and unclean that she carried it not in her fingers but between her toes. A chicken --a hen not a cock-- was scratching futilely in the dirt between the hut and the tree where the other girls, their own ordeal over, lay. M'Lissa lifted her foot and flung this small object in the direction of the hen, and she, as if waiting for this moment, rushed toward M'Lissa's upturned foot, located the flung object in the air and then on the ground, and in one quick movement of beak and neck, gobbled it down" (*Possessing* 75). The image of the chicken, then, also embodies an ambiguous duality: on the one hand it is a "sacrificial" chicken being devoured, and on the other it is the animal who actually eats what is removed from the female genitalia.

There are two more characteristics that emphasize the symbolic aspect of Tashi's narrative: the myth and the chorus, as a means of blurring reality and imagination, which, as already discussed, is the aim of the tale. As mentioned in Chapter Two, there is an interconnection between myths and practises in some African religions. In Olinka society, where the tale takes place, the ritual of circumcision is justified by their conception of God and the Creation of the World. In God's act of intercourse with the earth, whose sexual organ was a termite hill, God had to cut down the termite hill in order to penetrate her (*Possessing* 173-4). After further intercourse with the earth, God created the man and the woman endowed both with two souls of different sex, "in the man the female soul was located in the prepuce; in the woman the male soul was in the clitoris" (*Possessing* 175). Afterwards, each human being had to "merge himself in the sex for which he appeared to be best fitted" (*Possessing* 175). Although assuming that man is bisexual, it is believed that "the dual soul is a danger" (*Possessing* 177). Circumcision and excision are, then, the remedy. Pierre, Adam's bisexual son, who develops a stronge friendship with Tashi at the end of her life, admits that "the original incident was destined to affect the course of things forever" (*Possessing* 174). So, the myth creates a conception of a world in which everything is fixed and established. As Roland Barthes asserts, "the very end of myths is to immobilize the world: they must suggest and mimic a universal order which has fixated once and for all the hierarchy possessions".[22] Consequently, the myth and the order of things it establishes is handed down from generation to generation. In *Possessing*, this fact is symbolized by the chorus.

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[22] Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*. (New York: The Noonday Press, 1989), p. 149.

The choral aspect of the tale is not only granted by the taking part of several characters who are narrators of Tashi's story, but also by the representation of a real chorus of elderly men. This fact contributes to the alluded choral aspect of *Possessing*, but also confers the tale a dramatic element. There is a powerful scene in the novel, in which Tashi sees herself witnessing a conversation among a few Olinka elderly men she heard as a child, which she had laid in her unconscious (*Possessing* 236-39). This men are represented through numbers -numbers one, two, three and four- as a means of symbolizing the whole society. Their talk is about the origin of life and about the need of female circumcision for men's pleasure. They say:

> Number one: God liked it fighting!
> (Laughter)
> Number two: God liked it tight!
> Number three: God liked to remember what He had done, and how it felt before it got loose.
> Number four: God is wise. That is why He created the *osuiga*.
> All: With her sharpened stone and bag of thorns!
> Number one: With her needle and thread.
> Number two: Because He liked it tight.
> Number three: God likes to feel big.
> Number four: What man does not? (*Possessing* 238).

Through that scene, Tashi is able to verify how social and religious rituals are transmitted and validated from one generation to another. As Bernard Bell assures, the myth is "used to reinforce belief in the need for making the ritual

sacrifices they provided to maintian the harmony of the individual and the nation with the rythms of nature"[23].

As we have seen, abused, desexualized, and unable to relate to the outside, Tashi takes refuge in her imagination. As Barbara Omolade states:

> When their sexual experiences are painful, women tend to negate their identity as sexual being. Sexual oppression tends to direct itself directly to the internal, the feeling and emotional center, the private and intimate self, existing within the external context of power and social control.[24]

Consequently, sexually dead, Tashi retreats into her imagination, her fantasy world and the domain of the storyteller. Although she is remembered by the rest of the characters for her great imagination and her passion for storytelling as a child,[25] it is when she becomes aware of the damage done to her, that she looks inside herself. Silenced the language of her body, bound to be an object and a victim, Tashi needs to turn towards herself and tell her own story, and become, then, subject. It is when Tashi, who has been initially fragmented by an external force,

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[23] Bernard Bell, "The Roots of the Early Afro-American Novel", *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition*, p. 16.

[24] Barbara Omolade, "Heart of Darkness", *Powers of Desire. The Politics of Sexuality*. Ed. by Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell & Sharon Thompson. (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983), p. 350.

[25] Adam, for example, says: "The Tashi I remember was always laughing, and making up stories, or flitting about the place on errands for her mother" (*Possessing* 14). Olivia also repeatedly remembers throughout the novel that the way Tashi expresses herself as girl and even as an adult, is evading the issue by making up a story.

herself, and express the totality of her self. This way, her journey to freedom starts. Through the telling of her story, trough the voice she acquires by doing so, Walker's character converts her silence into language and her actions into acts of self-affirmation. By means of this act of telling, not only through deeds but also through words, Tashi is able to resist the oppressive situation the rite of female circumcision involves. Storytelling, then, becomes a means of resistance and survival.

CONCLUSION.

In 1929, Virginia Woolf wrote in her boook *A Room of One's Own*, that women writers "think back through [their] mothers".[1] Within this maternal literary heritage, contemporary female writers seek their female precursors so as to be able to establish their differences with their male canonical counterparts. Due to race, sexual and class oppresion, the need to discover a matrilineal heritage becomes fundamental for Black female authors. In celebrating their literary foremothers, Black women writers establish a link between themselves and their oral and written tradition.

As it has been mentioned several times throughout this study, Alice Walker has repeatedly expressed her debt towards female writers, such as Zora Neale Hurston and Nella Larsen, her literary "mothers". She also admits to have been inspired by her mother and all women who have passed on their knowledge to their children. Since the time of slavery, Black women have been able to hand down orally their knowledge to their offspring. Through the stories they told, their children became able to create a high sense of self-reliance, and, in spite of the hardships, face the world and develop themselves as individuals. This oral tradition embodied, then, strategies for survival. In many ways, Walker has assured that the source of her own art comes from the stories and knowledge inherited from her mother: "Only recently did I fully realize this . . . So many of the stories that I write, that we all write, are my mother's stories".[2] So, Walker

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[1] Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*. (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1929), p. 79.

[2] Alice Walker, "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens", *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*. (New York: Harcourt Brace & Jovanovich, 1983), p. 240.

maintains herself in the oral and literary tradition of the African American woman, and is committed to safeguard her heritage.

In her work, Walker has presented the inner conflicts African American women have to deal with, and how they need to embrace their people's traditions in their struggle to survive. She has also presented African American women who turn their eyes to the African continent, searching for their roots so as to define themselves as Americans of African descent. The search for one's roots resembles Walker's own search: not only has she been to Africa but also has looked for her literary roots, since she discovered her much praised Zora Neale Hurston's unmarked grave in Florida. Although it could be thought that she separates herself from the African American traditions, with *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, Walker recovers the tradition of storytelling and confirms again her desire and her being part of the African American women's tradition, and, therefore, her acceptance of her African heritage.

In *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, Walker denounces the traditional African rite of female genital mutilation, which alienates the woman who undergoes it. Moreover, the author turns to an African and African American tradition, that of storytelling, which connects her to the heritage transmitted by her ancestors. By means of embracing storytelling, the woman achieves her female and sexual liberation. This tradition is, then, conceived as a strategy for survival and resistance. Furthermore, Walker's narrative becomes a message of liberation for the future generations: "self-possession will always be impossible for us to claim. But perhaps your daughter . . . " (*Possessing* 273), says Tashi in her novel. Consequently, the knowledge inherited through storytelling is at the bottom of the

quest for identification. Walker symbolizes the necessity of adopting a critical perspective towards both African and American cultures, so as to reject what is detrimental and hold on to what is beneficial and positive. In order to be able to adopt this critical perspective, it is necessary to acquire a thorough knowledge of the past. It is within the frame of storytelling that Walker' inquires about the mythological and religious beliefs which the community where the action takes place rely on to perpetuate generation after generation the ritual of circumcision. As one of the characters asserts:

> a culture in which it is mandatory that every single female be systematically desexed, there would have to be some coded, mythological reason given for it, and used secretly among the village elders (*Possessing* 233).

Such awareness manifests how sexual practise is related to social control and how it interferes with female sexuality. Furthermore, without rejecting a culture as a whole, Walker, then, does affirm the necessity of questioning and deconstructing a patriarchal order that "breeds alienation, exploitation, and the destruction of people's lives, especially Black women's".[3] Thus, she embodies the already mentioned duality of praise and rejection --i.e., storytelling and the rite of female circumcision--.

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[3] Bernard Bell, *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition*. (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1987), p. 266.

In some African cultures, female circumcision is an attempt to strip the female genitalia of what is masculine, while male circumcision is a defeminization of the male.[4] Genital mutilation is thus a ritual to create and limit sexual identity and to emphasize gender distinctions. As Wendy Wall asserts, "Gender differentiation is not naturally defined but must be constructed through social activity".[5] Consequently, the notion that gender can be determined is suggested in the performance of these rites. The human body is, then, conceived as the terrain where a specific set gender can be inscribed.

In *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, Walker carries out the task of demonstrating how these practises of the removal of the genitalia are cruel and destructive, as the blunt and harsh passages describing the operation, its procedure and its after-effects reveal. Female circumcision desensitizes the woman to all erotic pleasure, and annihilates her sexual self, hindering the woman's fulfilment as a whole female. Walker stresses the fact that such rites deny the possibility of constructing the woman's identity, through her representation of the woman's fragmentation into several personalities, revealed through the different names under which she apperars. The novel is, then, about the destruction of women by a specific gender construction.

In *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, Walker presents a woman in relation to her sexuality, to herself and to the world. Her emotions are revealed through the

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[4] See Mary Daly's book *Gyn/Ecology: A Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), pp. 155-78, and Hanny Lightfoot-Klein's *Prisoners of Ritual. An Odyssey into Female Circumcision in Africa* (New York: Harrington Park Press, 1989), for their discussions on female genital mutilation.

[5] Wendy Wall, "Lettered Bodies and Corporeal Texts in *The Color Purple*", *Studies in American Fiction* 16:1 (Spring 1988): p. 87.

equation of body and text, where her inner conflict and oppositions --death versus life, hate versus love, America versus Africa-- are disclosed. Moreover, as the women writers from the 1970s and 1980s did, through this African-born woman character but an American citizen, Walker personifies African American women's need to reconcile their African heritage with their American culture and to define what part of their African past is essential for their development as whole females in America. In order to achieve this reconciliation, Walker insists that African American women should question and analyze both African and American cultures from a critical perspective. Therefore, in spite of rejecting female circumcision, Walker's narrative is pervaded with the characteristic imagery and symbolism of the African tradition, because she believes "[it is] the one thing that Afro-Americans have retained of their African heritage".[6] So, folklore is conceived as a means of defining character, personal identity and cultural rootedness within a community. Walker highlights women's desire to gain their own individuality within a community. African American women, and all women, need to find themselves and to reach self-fulfiment in order to feel they belong to their own community.

Ultimately, it might be said that in *Possessing the Secret of Joy* Alice Walker talks from a Eurocentric --a White and Western-- point of view, and not from an afrocentric one. In this case, she would not be the right person to blame the rite of female circumcision, on which her novel is focused. It could be argued, though, that those who defend such rite are talking from a patriarchal point of view and, so, forgetting the female perspective. However, I do not think that

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6 Bernard Bell, *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition*, p. 260.

Walker speaks from a Eurocentric point of view because she has not been the first one in denouncing this rite. She has worked together and been inspired by African and Middle Eastern women, whom she mentions in her acknowledgements (*Possessing* 287), who have already criticized this practise in their countries. Therefore, in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, Walker expresses the need to consider a missing element when talking about culture and tradition: the female point of view.

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