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# ELITIST ANTI-CIRCUMCISION DISCOURSE AS MUTILATING AND ANTI-FEMINIST

*Micere Githae Mugo*<sup>†</sup>

The space limitation of this paper militates against a coherent response to the wealth of pertinent ideas raised by Professor Obiora's timely intervention on the question of female circumcision.<sup>1</sup> Until now, the issue has been approached mostly from anthropological, health, policy, and popular literature perspectives, but it has never been so closely or extensively examined through a legal lens. Obiora's paper is a striking example of excellent scholarship, based on amazingly extensive library research and presented through elaborate, yet incisive, logical arguments that are articulated with impressive lucidity. While coming from a legal perspective in content and thrust, the paper also traverses several areas of academic endeavor with great ease, offering a rich panorama of multidisciplinary platforms from which a variety of scholars can engage in serious intellectual discourse over this hot issue.

My contribution addresses Obiora's concerns regarding the negative role played by popular literature and other forms of writing that stereotype African women who practice or support circumcision, depicting them "only as victims and preyers-upon each other."<sup>2</sup> This paper pursues and reinforces a number of pertinent

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1. I use this term deliberately in an effort to keep discourse open, especially with women who observe the practice. Obiora's paper has persuaded me that the use of the phrase "genital mutilation" alienates and criminalizes the very population with whom one is seeking to hold conversation. It also imposes an external definition on them, displacing their self-definition, which should be left intact, even if one does not agree with it.

2. L. Amede Obiora, *Bridges and Barricades: Rethinking Polemics and Intransigence in the Campaign Against Female Circumcision*, 47 CASE W. RES. L. REV. 275, 303 (1997) (quoting Audre Lorde, *An Open Letter to Mary Daly*, in *SISTER OUTSIDER* 67 (1996)).

points made by Obiora, the central one being that certain "circumcision protestations contradict feminist principles,"<sup>3</sup> and further, that a reading of *most* western "texts" on the subject "suggests that cultural imperialism and orientalism may well lurk behind tendentious exposés."<sup>4</sup> To liberate my own exposé from the kind of academic elitism that deliberately uses impenetrable vocabulary, enigmatic philosophizing, and alienating "trade" language to display the writer's intellectual power over her/his readers, I will speak to my audience in very plain words. Communication between those debating this subject is so urgently required that no barrier should be allowed to stand in the way of this burning conversation.

My paper opens with a disclaimer in which I denounce the *practice of circumcision*, a move to be clearly differentiated from the negation or demonization of *those who practice it*. It then moves on to define feminist writing and its supposed role in raising the consciousness of, liberating, and empowering victims of gender oppression, while condemning the systems and structures that enslave them. Through an analysis of *Possessing the Secret of Joy*<sup>5</sup> and *Warrior Marks*,<sup>6</sup> I seek to demonstrate the significance of Obiora's call when she reminds elitist-prone feminist militants that true "feminism rejects elitism and vanguardism."<sup>7</sup> My standpoint reinforces the indictment of long-nosed feminists, who, ironically, end up practicing "the very silencing and stigmatization of women that feminism challenges."<sup>8</sup> Supporting Obiora, I argue that what I term "the external messiah syndrome" is a real danger even when one is dealing with the best intended of anti-circumcision campaigners, not to mention agents of Western cultural philistinism parading as feminists. The point made is that armchair activism is a form of invasion, perceiving, as it does, the oppressed as helpless victims: objects who are totally devoid of the agency required to change their oppressive reality. In the case of female circumcision, the approach leads to the objectification of the very women who are, supposedly, under rescue. Overdone, the tendency can lead to not just the silencing that Obiora denounces, but to the mutilation of the subject's entire being. In all this, cultural imperialism and

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3. *Id.* at 292.

4. *Id.*

5. ALICE WALKER, *POSSESSING THE SECRET OF JOY* (1992).

6. ALICE WALKER & PRATIBHA PARMAR, *WARRIOR MARKS* (1993).

7. Obiora, *supra* note 2, at 312.

8. *Id.*

class domination come to the forefront, as does the kind of ideological provincialism that ends up "blaming the victim." Instead, the systems and structures responsible for producing the kind of false consciousness for which the targeted "offenders" are being scathed should be exposed. In sum, this paper views any writing that conforms to the above description and tendencies as a contradiction in terms, even as it promotes itself in the name of feminism.

While reinforcing the role of feminist writing in raising the consciousness of, liberating, and empowering oppressed women, the paper concludes also that such writing should facilitate conversation with women who practice circumcision, rather than dictate to them what is to be done. More than this, such writings should point out avenues through which the women at risk can cultivate agency, so that they can become active participants in the transformation of the oppressive reality facing them. In sum, I conclude that *Possessing the Secret of Joy* and *Warrior Marks* are sorely lacking in fulfilling these tasks.

Why the special attention to Alice Walker? By virtue of Alice Walker's accomplishments as a powerful, well-known feminist writer—taken seriously by most people who read her writings across the globe—her views on female "genital mutilation" have come to constitute the last word on the subject of female circumcision. As well-meaning as Walker's campaign is, however, her fiction mainly has served to validate the "professional mourners" of Achebe's proverbial world, who wail louder than the bereaved, while silencing and vilifying the very people being mourned.<sup>9</sup> Walker's fictional depiction of the African world is condescending and touristic. Her philosophical outlook is informed by colonial and missionary conceptions of Africa, while her analysis draws from anthropologists of that same tradition. These assertions will be demonstrated by a close analysis of *Possessing the Secret of Joy* and *Warrior Marks*.

Before I go into the analysis, however, it is important to make my stance on female circumcision unequivocal. Simply, I am totally opposed to the practice. The reasons are many and cannot be fully justified here. A mention of the major ones will have to suffice. One: voluntary cutting, bleeding, and even worse, removing

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9. See CHINUA ACHEBE, *THINGS FALL APART* 192 (1959) (satirizing Enoch, the Umuofian missionary convert, as an "outsider who wept louder than the bereaved").

of parts of one's body, even in the name of ritual, is a form of physical abuse. The ritual inflicts on the initiates traumatic pain and psychological violence that is, in many cases, harmful to the body. Two: given the possible health risks associated with circumcision, especially in this day and age of the HIV epidemic, any unnecessary laceration or puncturing of the body is negatively adventurous. Three: the circumcision of girls and small children, in particular, is an oppressive imposition by adults. Such cultural practice assumes that these little people are the "property" of their parents, families, and communities and that they have no right to choose for themselves. The ritual, thus, imposes an involuntary and irreversible condition upon them for the rest of their lives, robbing them of choice—a basic human right, even for children. Four: androcentrically constructed sexuality is definitely an issue here, especially given the fact that circumcision is interlinked with an "education" that socializes initiates to view womanhood in patriarchal terms. Five: on the eve of the twenty-first century, I do not see physical initiation as a necessary rite of passage, even if it is in the form of "ritualized marking of female genitalia . . . where the clitoris is barely nicked or pricked to shed a few drops of blood."<sup>10</sup> There are other forms of self-assertion that are more relevant to current day needs in which women can engage. Six: all of society's resources in terms of time, energy, focus, and material support should be put into aiding women to acquire skills and experiences that empower them with liberating choices so that they can become true agents of change. Characterizing circumcision as a culturally definitive parameter is tantamount to fossilizing culture, instead of insisting that it dynamically address the most urgent, human needs of a given period. Seven: realistically speaking, for most of Africa the availability of basic health services and facilities, let alone reliable ones, is a critical problem. For this reason, talk of using medically safe ways to conduct circumcision is an abstraction for the majority of poor people on the continent who observe the practice. Eight: it is time we drew a decisive line between liberating cultural practice and outdated traditions, beliefs, and rituals. I am yet to be persuaded that circumcision is an expression of liberating cultural practice.

That circumcision as a form of self-fulfillment is necessary among African female youth in 1996, even in the rural areas, is a

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10. Obiora, *supra* note 2, at 288.

peculiar claim. It removes the emphasis from where it should be: on self-determination, especially given the systemic violation of poor people's rights at the basic levels of food, clothing, and shelter. The argument that, in undergoing circumcision, women come to define themselves as whole people is a pathetic myth today. It also absolves Africa's neo-colonial governments of the many responsibilities that they owe the masses, such as provision of resources that will enhance their self- and collective fulfillment. The point under labor is that circumcision is of no use in empowering women to overthrow oppressive conditions, economically, politically, or gender-wise. In condoning circumcision, I fear that feminists and self-aware African women risk the danger of being condescending towards their less privileged sisters, prescribing a form of opium for the masses. Would they really put their own daughters through circumcision?

Having made my stance on circumcision clear, it is equally important to underline the fact that my rejection of circumcision is not a moral judgment of those who practice it. After all, there are many rituals that repel one in the very cultures that condemn circumcision. As Obiora argues, "female circumcision is comparable to many perplexing idiosyncracies . . . that prevail in the West."<sup>11</sup> Rituals do not make sense to those outside the orbit in which they are observed. The activities that accompany initiation into fraternities and sororities in North America, for instance, verge on body abuse and obscenity. Just this fall, a Syracuse University rugby player posed for a nude photograph on the front page of *The Daily Orange*, a student newspaper, under a heroic sounding headline: "Rocking Rugby." A part of the story read: "At left, a naked Anthony Malliarakis stops for a drink of water after completing the traditional 'Zulu' run."<sup>12</sup> One is prompted to ask: what connotations lie behind naming this weird ritual race the "Zulu" run? Suppose this spectacle had taken place on an African university campus, what kind of write-ups would have appeared in the international press? I can imagine one such possible write up: "*tribal* rugby player runs around the campus in the nude, under *possession*, in fulfilling some *primitive* ritual." In America, however, this act of running naked in public is treated as an item of affirmative front page news. Take another example: when women pierce their

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11. *Id.* at 322.

12. *Rocking Rugby*, DAILY ORANGE, Sept. 16, 1996, at 1.

tongues, belly buttons, breasts, and I understand, even their *labia majora*, in order to place rings there, nobody seems to call such practices "mutilation." So, who determines what constitutes mutilation and what does not? These are the types of double standards to which Obiora's paper draws our attention.

Indeed, until Nawal El Saadawi pointed out that practices such as breast implantation, skin lifts, nose reconstructions, self-imposed bulimia, anorexia, and other forms of so-called women beautification rituals in the West were tantamount to body abuse, nobody described them as "mutilations."<sup>13</sup> Thanks to Nawal's intervention a decade or so ago, it has now become fashionable to place these practices on the same footing as female circumcision. In *Warrior Marks* Walker and Parmar do this, but in only a token fashion. Without a doubt, one clearly heeds Obiora's point that dominating cultures appoint themselves as the barometers of morality and ethical standards while simultaneously double-dealing.

A further important observation made by Obiora's paper is the identification of incriminating language as a key obstacle in the circumcision debate. The use of a term such as "mutilation" that is then extended to dismiss an entire heritage as a "mutilating culture" is so extreme as to stifle dialogue. Perpetrators of systems such as capitalism and imperialism, which incapacitate people just as badly—materially, physically, psychologically, and emotionally—are not depicted as practicing "mutilation" or "torture." Witness the number of children suffering from kwashiakor on the continent of Africa, as a result of imperialist exploitation.<sup>14</sup> This condition also can be described as body "mutilation." Who determines what terms are used against whom? Clearly, epistemological control is related to economic domination. Characterizing circumcision as "mutilation" and "torture" is tantamount to criminalizing our communal grandmothers, mothers, aunts—African women who are mostly poor victims of false self-awareness. They are nothing but victims/survivors of this outdated ritual and calling them "murderers," "mutilators," and "torturers" is unjust. It is blaming the victim.

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13. See Nawal El Saadawi, Address at the Writer's Workshop, Zimbabwe International Book Fair on *Women and Books* (July 29-Aug. 3, 1985).

14. It has been reported that "there could be as many as 300 million chronically undernourished people on the continent by 2010," and most of these will be children. *AFRICA RECOVERY*, May-June 1996, at 7.

Like Obiora, I advocate the use of emancipatory education to increase self-awareness among those who practice circumcision, persuading them to abandon the practice through understanding and conviction, not through intimidation. Revolutionary theory, very elaborately developed by Paulo Freire, among others, correctly argues that in the final analysis it is imperative for the oppressed to liberate themselves.<sup>15</sup> It emphasizes the role of dialogical education, in which the oppressed is an active subject. Imposition, coercion, and punishment from self-appointed moral authorities, especially when they happen to be situated within oppressive patriarchal institutions of capitalist and neo-colonial states, will not facilitate the eradication of female circumcision. Dictation goes against the grain of feminist discourse.

Before moving into the texts themselves, let us define feminist writing more extensively. Like other writings, feminist literature reflects the class position, concerns, and ideological orientation—the overall world view—of a given writer. In an analysis elsewhere,<sup>16</sup> I have placed writers in three categories: reactionary/conservative, liberal/elitist, and progressive/revolutionary. Feminist writers fit into these categories, as well. It is my contention that the third category of writers, progressive/revolutionary, articulates the interests of oppressed women best, especially those from the so-called Third World and, consequently, those from the poor populations of Africa. Given the limitation of space, therefore, discussion in this paper will focus on the third category, using this group as the model against which to assess *Possessing the Secret of Joy* and *Warrior Marks*.

As I intimated before, liberating feminist writing has the responsibility to expose not only the practices but also the institutions, structures, and systems that embody and perpetuate the oppression of women. Through clear analysis of the contradictions inherent in these, such writings should articulate and denounce identified forms of oppression, creating consciousness in the process. The literature also should demonstrate empathy, understanding, concern, and love for the oppressed. Further, the writing should validate the humanity and dignity of the oppressed, depicting them as people who are capable of engaging in transformative

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15. See PAULO FREIRE, *PEDAGOGY OF THE OPPRESSED* (1983) (originally published in 1972).

16. See Micere G. Mugo, *Exile and Creativity: A Prolonged Writer's Block*, in *THE WORD BEHIND BARS—THE PARADOX OF EXILE* (K. Anyidoho ed., forthcoming 1997).



action: human beings who possess the potential to overturn the oppressive conditions that militate against their full self-realization. Offering solidarity and committing itself to liberating action, the literature should indicate possible avenues out of the conditions of entrapment, thus dispelling resignation on the part of the victims while infusing them with a spirit of determination, and a thirst for revolutionary change. Empowering feminist writing recognizes the fact that, in the final analysis, the victims themselves must enact the liberational drama if genuine emancipation is to occur. The writer's task, therefore, is to facilitate the empowerment process and not to take over the victims' struggle. More than this, the writer must guard against the mercenary arrogance of perceiving herself as a savior of people who are incapable of self-emancipation.

In contrast, the discourse in *Possessing the Secret of Joy* silences the main character, Tashi, as a subject, depicting her as an invalid and a dependant who never recovers from her mutilation by M'Lissa, the *tsunga*,<sup>17</sup> or from betrayal by her own mother. The *tsunga* is demonized, Tashi's mother condemned, and the entire community indicted for her tragedy. Other than crazy ramblings and tortured thoughts resulting from psychological disorientation, Tashi, the victim of "mutilation," has no voice. Her hope lies in interventions by Westerners and Americans who, one by one, come into her life and attempt to rescue her at great sacrifice. One can only echo Audre Lorde when she says "dismissal stands as a real block to communication."<sup>18</sup> A writer cannot dismiss the subjects of her statement and expect a dialogue to result. No doubt dismissive and alienating, the discourse in *Possessing the Secret of Joy* turns Tashi into a victim of double "mutilation."

In Walker's book, the preoccupation with sexuality, almost at the exclusion of the entire human being, results in defining women first as genital carriers. The dedication to the novel emphasizes this preoccupation: "This Book is Dedicated/With Tenderness and Respect/To the Blameless/Vulva."<sup>19</sup> I am reminded of a telephone confrontation that I had with one of Alice Walker's agents in July 1992. I had been invited as a panelist to discuss *Possessing the Secret of Joy* at the Equitable Auditorium, New York City, with, I

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17. The *tsunga* performs the ritual circumcision of girls. See Obiora, *supra* note 2, at 324 (defining *tsunga*).

18. Audre Lorde, *An Open Letter to Mary Daly*, in *SISTER OUTSIDER* 69 (1996).

19. WALKER, *supra* note 5.

believe, Alice Walker present. The promoter called to ask for details about me. I explained that I was an international scholar and Visiting Professor at Cornell University, a political activist, poet, and playwright. As if she had not heard me or thought what I had just said was of no relevance, she proceeded to ask me: "Are you mutilated?" Now that question to a fifty-year-old African woman is not just shattering but downright rude. In shock and disbelief, I asked her what she had said, and she repeated the question. Although I protested against objectification, the woman remained adamant. I was livid and made this abundantly clear by promptly withdrawing my participation. Later, I received a letter of apology from her that, in the last paragraph, read:

As Tashi so aptly described in "Possessing the Secret of Joy," there is "a bluntness about African-American women" that she couldn't quite relate to with her new psychiatrist. But luckily after a while, Tashi soon became friends with her American doctor. I hope that you can forgive my African-American bluntness as Tashi did.<sup>20</sup>

For this sister, all that mattered about me were my genitals, but I happened to be a lot more than this. I proved to be a disappointment because I did not fit the stereotype. Her greatest influence, Alice Walker's book, from which she quoted in her apology to me, added insult to injury.

This objectification is what Obiora is talking about when she remarks: "Female circumcision has been so highly touted that it has become the prime point of reference in the West *vis-à-vis* African women."<sup>21</sup> Sensitive to this stereotyping, Angela Davis enters the African world (Egypt) differently.<sup>22</sup> She writes: "As an Afro-American woman familiar with the sometimes hidden dynamics of racism, I had previously questioned the myopic concentration on female circumcision in U.S. feminist literature on African women."<sup>23</sup> One agrees with Dr. Latifa Zayat when she complains: "[W]e are being defined in terms of sexuality for reasons which are not in our own interest."<sup>24</sup> Echoing similar sentiments, Dr.

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20. Letter from agent of Alice Walker, to Micere G. Mugo (June 18, 1992) (on file with author).

21. Obiora, *supra* note 2, at 324-25.

22. See ANGELA DAVIS, *Women in Egypt: A Personal View*, in *WOMEN CULTURE AND POLITICS* 117 (1990).

23. *Id.*

24. *Id.* at 125.

Shehida Elbaz also voices concern, remarking that "the campaign against circumcision underway in the West [has] created the utterly false impression that . . . genital mutilation is the main feature of Muslim women's oppression."<sup>25</sup> Davis clinches the argument when she underlines the importance of placing the discourse within "the larger economic-political context of male supremacy,"<sup>26</sup> *especially under imperialism and neo-colonialism*.

As mentioned earlier, in liberating feminist writing the subject of oppression should not be criminalized. Yet, with the exception of the character Dura, this is exactly what Walker does with African women in her book, namely: M'Lissa, the *tsunga*, Tashi's mother, and even Tashi herself, a prisoner in the dock for murder as the book closes. The first two are, in fact, depicted as sadistic murderers. Tashi is made by Walker to introduce her mother as follows:

I studied the white rinds on my mother's heels, and felt in my own heart the weight of Dura's death settling upon her spirit, like the groundnuts that bent her back. As she staggered under her load, I half expected her footprints, into which I was careful to step, to stain my own feet with tears and blood. *But my mother never wept*, though like the rest of the women, when called upon to salute the power of the chief and his counselors she could let out a cry that assaulted the very heavens with its praising pain.<sup>27</sup>

In this African mother we not only have a cold blooded murderer but a disciple of the chief and, therefore, an extension of male oppression. "She was the kind of woman who jumps even before the man says boo. Your mother helped me hold your sister down," M'Lissa tauntingly tells Tashi towards the end of the novel.<sup>28</sup>

M'Lissa is clearly demon-like: she is a glutton whose favorite dishes are "lamb curry, raisin rice and *chocolate mousse*,"<sup>29</sup> she has "clawlike toes,"<sup>30</sup> she is a "witch,"<sup>31</sup> and she is a liar and a murderer<sup>32</sup> who ultimately confesses: "But who are we but tortur-

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25. *Id.* at 121.

26. *Id.* at 119.

27. WALKER, *supra* note 5, at 6-7 (emphasis added).

28. *Id.* at 253.

29. *Id.* at 148 (emphasis added).

30. *Id.* at 204.

31. *Id.* at 207.

32. See WALKER, *supra* note 5, at 204.

ers of children?"<sup>33</sup> By putting first person plural speech into M'Lissa's mouth, Walker strikes twice, having the *tsunga* incriminate both herself and other women. In fact, M'Lissa is made to boast about the fact that she and other circumcisers have no feelings:

Can you imagine the life of the *tsunga* who feels? I learned not to feel. You can learn, too. In this I was like my grandmother, who became so callous people called her "I Am a Belly." She would circumcise the children and demand food immediately after; even if the child still screamed. For my mother it was a torture.<sup>34</sup>

Still another woman and mother is depicted as an accomplice in the persecution and "torture" of her own daughter. The daughter is married to Tourabe, a wife abuser, from whom she eventually runs away, then drowns herself. Here, this young woman's mother is shown as being responsible for her daughter's suicide:

She'd gone to her parents and asked them how they expected her to endure the torture: he had cut her open with a hunting knife on their wedding night and gave her no opportunity to heal. She hated him. . . . Her father instructed her mother to convince her of her duty. Because she was Tourabe's wife, her place was with him, her mother told her. The young woman explained that she bled. Her mother told her it would stop: that when she herself was cut open she bled for a year. She had also cried and run away. Never had she gotten beyond the territory of men who returned her to her tribe. She had given up, and endured.<sup>35</sup>

This mother thus had resigned herself to her fate and so advises her daughter to do the same. Unable to endure, however, the daughter kills herself. Significantly, the story is narrated by Pierre, one of the book's messianic figures. He heard it from his mother, another one of the book's messiahs.<sup>36</sup>

Patronized, objectified, and shorn of all human dignity and agency, Tashi may be spared demonic depiction, but is treated like

33. *Id.* at 219.

34. *Id.* at 214.

35. *Id.* at 136.

36. *See id.* at 134.

a receptacle, characterized by a dependency that verges on permanent disability. Walker inflicts a victim mentality on Tashi from the moment we meet her in the novel—weeping and in the jungle.<sup>37</sup> Thus, Tashi comes to symbolize the “crying child” and the weeping is said to have stained her life.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, when recovering from her “mutilation,” the narrator relates that Tashi’s “legs, ashen and wasted, were bound,”<sup>39</sup> a practice that I have never heard of in African initiation rituals. Tashi tells Adam: “I am like a chicken bound for market. The scars on my face are nearly healed, but I must still fan the flies away. The flies are attracted by the odor coming from my blood, eager to eat at the feast provided by my wounds.”<sup>40</sup> In hypochondriatic fashion, Tashi is shown as having surrendered to fate, very much like the other African women of Walker’s novel.

Indeed, this victim of Walker’s rendering is also self-destructive. She may be accused of participating in not only her own self-mutilation, but the mutilation of others, such as her son Benny who is born handicapped. After all, Tashi takes herself to the “bush” looking for “mutilation.”

At first she merely spoke about the strange compulsion she sometimes experienced of wanting to mutilate herself. Then one morning I woke 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.<sup>41</sup>

This is presented as the result of Tashi’s decision to undergo circumcision. The reader is treated to a gruesome picture of the Tashi who, ironically, is supposed to have become “strong, invincible. Completely woman. Completely African. Completely Olinka.”<sup>42</sup> The cutting irony on the writer’s part is complete at this point. And the new Tashi?

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 a month. There were premenstrual

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37. See WALKER, *supra* note 5, at 7 (describing Tashi).

38. *Id.* at 7, 262.

39. *Id.* at 44.

40. *Id.* at 45.

41. *Id.* at 51.

42. WALKER, *supra* note 5, at 63.

cramps: cramps caused by the near impossibility of flow passing through so tiny an aperture as M'Lissa had left, after fastening together the raw sides of Tashi's vagina with a couple of thorns and inserting a straw so that in healing, the traumatized flesh might not grow together, shutting the opening completely . . . There was the odor, too, of soured blood, which no amount of scrubbing, until we got to America, ever washed off.<sup>43</sup>

To begin with, Tashi is a complete embarrassment to her American husband. She has no confidence in herself, but comes to adore America and its culture. America would be the land of salvation for Tashi, if only this were within reach for a "mutilated" African woman! She also adores Western and European culture, but in a naive, childlike manner, viewing Mzee, her psychologist, "as a kind of Santa Claus."<sup>44</sup> At one point she vows: "They would all take America away from me if they could. But I won't let them. If I have to, I'll stop them in their tracks."<sup>45</sup> She loves her "adopted country,"<sup>46</sup> we are told. At such moments, of course, she is Tashi-Evelyn, not just Tashi.

In Tashi, we have a crazy imbecile who is not only a burden and liability to the very people that she is dependent upon—Adam, Olivia, Lisette, and the Old Man—but a child abuser. She boxes Benny's ears for no reason other than to make him "squeal and cringe," after which she experiences "relief."<sup>47</sup> At another time, she pelts Pierre with stones when he pays her an innocent visit as a boy, making him bleed.<sup>48</sup> She steals Adam's letters (from Lisette) and hates Lisette, who is presented as a model of devotion towards her. In actual fact, Tashi is at times depicted as savage and animalistic: "Evelyn laughs. Flinging her head back in deliberate challenge. The laugh is short. Sharp. The bark of a dog. Beyond hurt. Unquestionably mad. Oddly free."<sup>49</sup> Circumcision is shown as having produced not just an incurable invalid, but a brute.

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43. *Id.* at 64.

44. *Id.* at 74.

45. *Id.* at 164.

46. *Id.* at 208.

47. WALKER, *supra* note 5, at 142.

48. *See id.* at 143.

49. *Id.* at 163.

Having thus dismembered, or rather "mutilated," Tashi's entire person and then having dismissed Olinka (read African) women, Walker leaves her victim at the mercy of her appointed messiahs. These appear in the form of Adam, Tashi-Evelyn's African-American husband who is the son of missionaries in Olinka; Lisette, Adam's French mistress; Tashi's uncle, affectionately known as Mzee or the Old Man; Pierre, the offspring from the affair between Adam and Lisette; Raye, Tashi-Evelyn's African American psychiatrist; and, finally, Olivia, Adam's sister, interestingly never referred to as Tashi's sister-in-law. Benny, Tashi and Adam's son, misses the messiah mark. He is, himself, another disability case who needs Pierre to explain his mother's illness. Indeed, just as Pierre devotes himself, like his mother does, to unravelling Tashi's psychological malady, so does he become Benny's keeper and mentor, nurtured by the corridors of Berkeley and Harvard, which Tashi describes as "shrines."<sup>50</sup> The sources of knowledge sought to analyze Tashi's illness are all Western, including Freud of all people! Even the use of African mythology is corrupted; Marcel Griaule's theory on the origin of circumcision among the Dogon is showcased later, in *Warrior Marks*, where Walker is filmed lovingly stroking the rugged ends of an anthill, supposed to symbolize the clitoris. No one really cares to know what the Dogon people themselves say or think about their own myths. Thus, African epistemological relevance is dismissed, as are African men, women, and their world. External definitions are imposed on a primarily African problem and constitute the last word as far as Walker is concerned.

In the final analysis, the novel treats us to a monologue and forbids conversation with the subjects under analysis. Here, Tashi's fractured voice and consciousness cannot be accepted as compromises. Lastly, one notes that the prison in which Tashi waits for her execution is also a kind of AIDS hospital. The symbolism is cruel. Like AIDS, circumcision is an incurable epidemic that will wipe out African women. The chapel in the prison, like its builders, the missionaries and the colonials, seems to be their only salvation.

The above should suffice in expounding on some of what Obiora's paper is referring to in speaking about "co-opting imperialist discourses,"<sup>51</sup> as they occur in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*.

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50. See *id.* at 175.

51. Obiora, *supra* note 2, at 323.

In writing and filming *Warrior Marks*, Walker and Parmar have the hindsight gained from the many discussions, debates, and controversies that accompanied the publication of *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. For this reason, there seems to be a deliberate effort on the part of the writers to include African viewpoints. Indeed, it is encouraging that limited interviews are held with African women, even though it appears that the respondents are brought in merely to confirm conclusions that the interviewers bring to the "discussion" table. Here at least, the silencing is less extreme, or perhaps less obvious. It is also commendable that the writers make an effort to relate female circumcision to practices that parallel it in the West, moving away from the fictionalized self-righteous posture of the younger Olivia: "I told her nobody in America or Europe cuts off pieces of themselves."<sup>52</sup> Also significant is the fact that from time to time there is an effort to discuss circumcision within a socio-political framework. There is even recognition that circumcision is not the only form of oppression faced by African women and that problems such as "imperialism, colonialism, drought, and other acts of a thoroughly pissed-off Nature"<sup>53</sup> need to be taken into account. So, between the earlier work and this one, there has been some progress in analyzing the problem, but not much.

Viewed from other relevant angles, *Warrior Marks* is also a classic example of alienating discourse and a revealing enactment of "the art of blaming the victim" on both paper and film. The work continues to condescend to survivors of circumcision, depicting and treating them as helpless victims. When Walker meets Aminata Diop in London, she tells us: "Deborah and I wrapped her in her coat the minute, each time, the cameras stopped. I took her hand in mine and never let go of her. *I could feel her need of a mother*, and I offered myself without reservation."<sup>54</sup> The reader has the impression that Walker is talking about a child and not a full grown woman who has all along taken care of herself. Walker is just as paternalistic in her treatment of Senegalese women, having arrived with preconceived notions of them: "The result is women with downcast eyes and stiff backs and necks (*they are of course beaten by fathers and brothers and husbands*). And men

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52. WALKER, *supra* note 5, at ix.

53. WALKER & PARMAR, *supra* note 6, at 28.

54. *See id.* at 32 (emphasis added).



look at a woman's body as if it is a meal."<sup>55</sup> The reader is, of course, struck by the generalization and stereotyping. Continued in this work as well is the criminalization of circumcisers and women who participate in the ritual. To Walker, the Mandinka heritage is not just a culture, but a "mutilating culture."<sup>56</sup> Looking at women from "mutilating" cultures, Walker is persuaded by a thesis passed onto her by Ayi Kwei Armah, saying:

Genitally mutilated women he's known have been very angry. I think now about what that means in a woman's relationship to her child. Does it mean she's often abrupt, cold, withholding, abusive? Or simply that she never smiles, which might be the greatest abuse of all?<sup>57</sup>

The image of the circumciser is disgusting: "I glanced at her hands—extremely dirty, with black gunk under the nails—and thought of her coarse hardness against the tenderest parts of these girls."<sup>58</sup> When Walker interviews the circumciser, she expresses surprise to find that the woman is actually human!<sup>59</sup> In the film, *Warrior Marks*, the images are done so that the circumcisers register a very hateful presence; they are hard, cold, and threatening, always "armed" with weapons of their trade. A reappearing knife of theirs in the film sends a shiver down the viewer's spine.

Orientalism, objectification, stereotyping, generalizations, and impositions of meaning abound in this book. A few examples will suffice. There is an allusion that "sweets" are a part of the African woman's life,<sup>60</sup> associating this with African women's imagined fatness. In fact, at one point Walker would have the reader believe that all African women are oversized, saying of Bilaela, "She's seriously overweight, though not, perhaps, by African standards. . . ."<sup>61</sup> The commonplace habit of chewing a tooth brush is explained anew, in Walker's imposed terms: "But what if there is another purpose? Something to bite down on instead of one's tongue?"<sup>62</sup> When a chicken is killed in the cleansing ceremony for

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55. *Id.* at 69 (emphasis added).

56. *Id.* at 73.

57. *Id.* at 71.

58. WALKER & PARMAR, *supra* note 6, at 47.

59. *See id.* at 348 (describing Walker's feelings about her interview with the circumcisor).

60. *Id.* at 43.

61. *Id.* at 51.

62. *Id.* at 71.

the circumcised girls, Walker imposes her text on the commonplace scene of a headless chicken let loose before it dies: "I understood the message of the sacrifice: Next time, we cut off your head."<sup>63</sup>

In *Warrior Marks* Alice Walker and Pratibha Parmar, as individuals, replace the fictional messiahs of *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. Parmar has unfortunate assumptions: "Except for the writings and voices of a handful of white feminists over the last decade or so, there has been deafening silence, a refusal to engage either critically or actively with this . . . area of feminist concern."<sup>64</sup> One wonders whether Parmar ever reads African women's work, for this is one area in which much work and writing have seen daylight and moonlight. From Kenya alone, Parmar should have heard of Rebeka Njau and Charity Wachiuma, but then she does not even know that Ngugi wa Thiong'o, famous as he is, comes from Kenya! What about the work of scholars, researchers, professionals, and activists, such as Nawal El Saadawi, Nahid Toubia, Zelda Salimo, Awa Thiam, Shehida Elbaz, Asthma A'Haleem, and many more? Having imagined a void in the arena where anti-circumcision activities are supposed to take place, Parmar concludes, "This reluctance to interfere with other cultures leaves African children at risk of mutilation."<sup>65</sup> Parmar might blush to learn that my own mother, now in her eighties, was active in this work long before she and Walker walked the earth.

Viewing as abandoned victims the African children she comes across while filming, Walker says: "I wanted to take them in my arms and fly away with them,"<sup>66</sup> and again:

A little girl, five or so, suddenly appeared out of nowhere and took my hand. Just for an instant. *I felt she knew I had come for her sake.* She was the "one African child" (that maybe my work against genital mutilation will protect) of my dreams.<sup>67</sup>

The echo in the italicized words has an ironic messianic ring.

As Walker and Parmar congratulate each other for their work and sacrifices on behalf of African children, they deny them of agency. One can only reinforce the fact that the depiction of the

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63. WALKER & PARMAR, *supra* note 6, at 47.

64. *Id.* at 94.

65. *Id.* at 95 (italics omitted).

66. *Id.* at 49.

67. *Id.* (emphasis added).

"victims" is so contemptuous and demeaning that the overall effect is one of denigration, rather than empowerment. The African women subjects are presented to the reader as a collection of helpless bundles of mutilated creatures and as stereotypes who are far from the semblance of living, dignified human beings. They are pitied and patronized, instead of being cherished, nurtured, and invested with faith as human subjects, potentially capable of understanding and changing the conditions that dehumanize them. The writers storm the scene of oppression as gallant messiahs appearing for the advent of rescuing an altogether apathetic and lesser breed of human beings. The writers and members of the film crew tower over the owners of land, presenting themselves as superior beings landed on a world overwhelmed by senseless savagery. The victims are summarized as mere carriers of mutilated genitals and very little else besides this. As readers we ask: Where are the human beings? Surely the women of Africa constitute more than genitals? The econo-political systems that impose the conditions that breed these women who are victims of such marked false conscientization, are hardly indicted. At the end of the day, it is the victims of this backwardness who are blamed. The African mother figure is whipped and the circumcisor crucified. But what kind of socio-economic system produces these individuals, we ask again? This last question is important because it puts the finger on the root cause of oppressive cultural practices, placing the responsibility for basic change where it should be.

The writers of *Warrior Marks* invade the African world in the spirit of colonial missionaries and the colonizers who brought, and imposed, already constructed world views upon the dominated, treating them as being incapable of rationality. The authors make no attempt to engage in dialogue with the women they meet in the villages. Instead, they pose framed questions, interrogating their objectified subjects in order to elicit the answers they want from them. *Warrior Marks* and its authors enact their dramas on the world of African women, using imposition as a guiding method/philosophy. The architects of the drama are indeed not just on their self-acclaimed metaphorical personal journeys, but, literally, on long ego trips. During these trips they congratulate themselves and one another, feeling good about shedding so many righteous tears for the unfortunate African women. Paradoxically, they end up psychologically dismembering and mutilating the African women that they have travelled along so many bumpy and dusty roads to save. They violate the women's dignity through labelling, typify-

ing, and objectifying. The writers are aloof and omniscient in tone, pulpit-postured in their narrative method, and altogether disempowering in their dominating presence. Ultimately, they pass a vote of no confidence in African women and their latent ability to change the structures that currently oppress them.

The authors of *Warrior Marks* have uprooted the problem of genital mutilation from its context, reduced all other struggles by African women to one issue, transplanted it and kidnapped it to the West and placed it in the hands of liberal feminists. The Western scene is now one in which the proverbial professional mourners weep louder than the bereaved. The real victims remain in the background, virtually invisible and inaudible, even as they continue to put up heroic struggles to liberate themselves from the basic oppressive structures and institutions that give rise to genital mutilations, among other evils.

In conclusion, I would posit that one thing is abundantly clear from this discussion: as exercises in progressive and empowering feminist literature for the oppressed, *Possessing the Secret of Joy* and *Warrior Marks* are both dismal failures. They belong to the tradition of colonialist writing, which is tourist-eyed in its perception and dismissive in its conception of the African world. Such writing disempowers poor African women and depicts them as either passive victims or active criminals, insofar as the question of female circumcision goes. These women sit in resignation, waiting for the single dramatic act of foreign messiahs. The only way out is the creation of socio-economic conditions and conscientizing educational/ cultural institutions that endow women with the power and agency to name themselves, so that they can do away with oppressive traditions, conditions, and relationships. If this is done, it will in time render circumcision irrelevant. However, it will take time, patience, and many prolonged conversations—not sermons. In this crisis, there is no middle-course, in my mind, if we are truly after a lasting solution.

