

Womanism in Alice Walker's *Possessing the Secret of Joy*: Possibilities and Counternarratives

Mulherismo em *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, de Alice Walker: possibilidades e contranarrativas

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ABSTRACT: This study examines womanism—its possibilities and contradictions—in Alice Walker's novel *Possessing The Secret of Joy* (2022). It focuses on Tashi's trajectory and her experience of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), highlighting its physical, psychological, and social consequences. The central question investigates how Walker's narrative, considering womanist principles, fosters reflection on women's struggles against intersectional oppressions, particularly those related to FGM, while considering identities and sociocultural contexts. The main objective is to discuss the relationship between FGM and womanism as represented in the novel. The methodology is qualitative and interpretive, emphasizing bibliographic review. The theoretical framework draws on Walker's womanist biography (White, 2004), key foundations of womanism (Phillips, 2006; Walker, 2021), and data from the UN (2015) and the WHO (2025), alongside African counternarratives (Oyéwùmí, 2003). The findings indicate that Tashi's journey, from a womanist perspective, enables a critical reading of resistance literature through the womanism lens.

KEYWORDS: Womanism; Female Genital Mutilation; Resistance Literature.

RESUMO: Esta pesquisa analisa o mulherismo — suas potencialidades e contradições — no romance *O Segredo da Alegria* (2022), de Alice Walker, a partir da trajetória de Tashi e de sua vivência da Mutilação Genital Feminina (MGF), enfatizando impactos físicos, psicológicos e sociais. A questão norteadora investiga como a narrativa de Walker, à luz de princípios mulheristas, favorece a reflexão sobre lutas de mulheres frente a opressões interseccionais, especialmente as relacionadas à MGF, considerando identidades e contextos socioculturais. Objetiva-se discutir a relação entre MGF e mulherismo conforme representada no romance. Adota-se metodologia qualitativa e interpretativa, com ênfase

em revisão bibliográfica. O referencial teórico mobiliza a biografia mulherista de Walker (White, 2004), fundamentos do mulherismo (Phillips, 2006; Walker, 2021) e dados da ONU (2015) e da OMS (2025), articulados a contranarrativas africanas (Oyèwùmí, 2003). Conclui-se que a experiência de Tashi sustenta uma leitura crítica da literatura de resistência através das lentes do mulherismo.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Mulherismo; Mutilação Genital Feminina; Literatura de Resistência.

Introduction

Literature constitutes an important tool for reflecting on and rethinking diverse issues inherent to human experience, inviting the reader to place themselves in the position of the characters, to share in their pains and joys, and to experience both pleasurable and arduous emotions throughout the narrative. This demonstrates the humanizing power of the literary object (Candido, 2023). Like art, literary works are not ideologically or politically neutral; they may therefore provoke estrangement, foster identification, and promote intercultural dialogue. They are intrinsically connected to the world, to human beings, to social problems, and to the intra- and interpersonal dynamics that permeate human (un)happiness.

This perspective is particularly evident in the work of the African American writer Alice Walker (2022). Originally published in 1992, *Possessing the Secret of Joy* was fully translated into Portuguese for the first time in 2022. This novel by Alice Walker is classified as a polyphonic narrative, whose fragmented and non-linear plot centers on the trajectory of the protagonist, Tashi, and her direct and indirect experiences with Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) as well as its social and psychological consequences. In Olinka culture, such a procedure is regarded as an essential rite for one's full inclusion within the community.

Throughout the plot, the reader is led to reflect on the interconnections between the protagonist's development and her past experiences, raising questions about the rationale behind this cultural marking of Olinka women's bodies, especially in view of the profound unhappiness that such a practice brings to Tashi's life. At the same time, the novel addresses psychiatric treatment as an attempted solution to the protagonist's anguish, which results from traumas experienced in both childhood and adulthood and undermine her cultural and identity-based self-confidence as an African woman. Tashi struggles to fit in and to move forward but faces significant challenges. It is around this issue that the interweaving of relationships in this fictional narrative emerges as the object of this study, establishing a dialogue with womanist theory through the emotional bonds of support and instability forged among the characters.

Thus, the following question arises: in what ways does Alice Walker's *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, analyzed in light of womanism as a dialogical praxis, and considering the possibilities and contradictions present in the plot, contribute to reflections on the multiple and mutual realities and struggles experienced by women in their diverse identity aspects and sociocultural contexts, such as the case of victims of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM)? The hypothesis is that Walker's literature incorporates, at its narrative core, Black female protagonists as well as secondary characters, who enable the problematization of women's place as subject, agent, and foundation of the origin of human life, regardless of culture.

In this sense, the application of hermeneutics in readings and analyses, aligned with womanist, feminist, and convergent theoretical perspectives, fosters diverse experiences of reader engagement. The reader ceases to be a mere passive observer and comes to understand the depth of the issues interwoven by culture and by the ways of conceiving and interpreting different realities. *Possessing the Secret of Joy* presents particularities, as it shifts the focus to the African context and its connections with other regions of the world. The protagonist, Tashi, is an African woman who suffered genital mutilation; however, her experience transcends the physical aspect, revealing a profound inner suffering. The psychological imbalance caused by mutilation leaves significant marks on her marital and interpersonal relationships. Her thoughts, at times confused and at other times lucid, reflect a chaotic and disturbing state, permeated by feelings to which the reader gains access through the stream of consciousness technique throughout the narrative.

The theoretical framework for addressing the concept of womanism is based on Phillips (2006), complemented by the theoretical perspectives of Walker (2021) and Collins (2017). Subsequently, it presents concise statistical and factual data on Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), drawing on references such as the United Nations (2015) and the World Health Organization (2025). These data are essential for considering the possibilities of a womanist reading and perception, as well as for reflecting on the human rights of women and children, embodied in the figure of Tashi. The final section turns to a literary analysis of the novel itself, engaging both narrative elements and critical interpretation as theorized by Eagleton (2022). This analysis converges on a womanist reading, with particular attention to the representation of African subjects, spaces, and cultures, in dialogue with the perspectives of Oyěwùmí and Nontsasa Nako (2003). Rather than establishing oppositions between different perspectives and positions of enunciation, this study aims, in line with its proposed objectives, to discuss and understand some of

the historical and cultural identity complexities inscribed in human relations and reflected in literature, as illuminated by *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (2022).

In the next section, the discussion will focus on how Alice Walker identifies herself as a womanist, emphasizing that her perspectives offer a more nuanced and transparent understanding of Black feminism. This approach is informed by her activist and literary trajectory, highlighting the ways in which her experiences and writings contribute to contemporary debates on race, gender, and social justice.

Alice Walker: Not a Feminist, but a Womanist

Alice Malsenior Tallulah-Kate Walker—better known simply as Alice Walker—has played multiple interconnected roles throughout her career: she is an activist, literary critic, and award-winning author of novels, short stories, essays, and poetry. She was born on February 9, 1944, in Eatonton, Georgia, United States, as the eighth and youngest child of Willie Lee Walker and Minnie Grant Walker, both sharecroppers¹.

Survival constituted a central value for the Walker family, as Alice’s parents and siblings lived through and overcame three significant historical moments in the United States: the Great Depression (1929–1939), the Jim Crow era (1930s–1940s), and the Civil Rights Movement (1960s–1970s). As African Americans, the family’s history and ancestry were marked by the transatlantic trafficking of enslaved Africans, which ended in the late nineteenth century but left deep imprints on the socioeconomic conditions of their descendants. As rural laborers, Walker’s parents frequently moved in search of better living conditions. In this sense, historical memory and the sense of belonging became fundamental values for Alice, shaping both her personal trajectory and professional activity.

From her earliest years, Walker developed a passion for reading and writing, encouraged by her parents’ determination to ensure educational opportunities for all their children. At the time, schools were racially segregated, and the doctrine of “separate but equal” masked deep disparities in access and quality. Institutions for Black students were often precarious in resources and infrastructure. Yet, in 1948, Alice’s father, together with the local community, helped build a school, enabling her, at the age of four, to benefit from this collective and meaningful

¹ Walker / walking, from the verb *to walk*, as a noun means “one who walks” or “walker.” In addition to its paternal significance, Alice takes pride in her surname, as her great-great-grandmother, Mary Poole, who had been enslaved, walked the journey from Virginia to Georgia carrying her daughter in her arms. Alice affirms that it is in memory of this journey that she embraces her “servant” surname (White, 2004, p. 19).

effort. From this event, the values of community and volunteerism became central principles in Walker's life and literary production.

A decisive turning point in Walker's relationship with literature occurred at the age of eight, around 1952, when an accident left her permanently injured. Her brothers had received BB guns to shoot birds, and in a careless moment, one of the shots struck Alice in her right eye. Pressured by her brothers to lie about the accident to avoid punishment, she endured not only physical pain but also the trauma of coercion. Feeling ugly and rejected because of the scar, Alice withdrew socially, often lowering her head to hide the injured eye. This isolation led her to immerse herself in books, deepening her commitment to reading and writing. Months later, her parents sent her to live with her grandparents, a decision Alice interpreted as abandonment and punishment, though her family eventually moved closer to her, which brought comfort. From this formative experience, the value of truth—opposed to painful falsehood—became a guiding ethical principle in Walker's life, shaping her work as both a writer and an activist.

Despite these controversies, Alice Walker remained steadfast in her stance and responded to criticism in the way most characteristic of her: by continuing to produce and publish profound, sensitive, and politically engaged literature, reaffirming her commitment to narratives of resistance and to the complexity of Black women's experiences. Concluding this brief section dedicated to Alice Walker's life and work, it is important to highlight that, throughout the 1990s, she wrote and published numerous works—novels, essays, poetry collections, and nonfiction. She consistently maintained a lifestyle marked by periods of seclusion in her homes, alternated with travels and experiences that nourished her creative process. Today, at the age of eighty, she maintains an official blog where she occasionally posts nonfiction texts, voicing her perspective—as always—on a wide range of subjects, from sociopolitical issues to matters inherent to human experience, race, and marginalized identities, much like a diverse garden of flowers imbued with spirituality².

In the following section, a discussion will be outlined regarding the womanist theory developed by Alice Walker, examining its ongoing contributions and relevance to contemporary Black feminist scholarship in the United States. This analysis seeks to contextualize Walker's perspectives within current academic debates, highlighting the enduring significance of her work for understanding gender, race, and social justice.

² <https://alicewalkersgarden.com>. Accessed on: June 20th, 2025.

Womanism: A Dialogic Framework for All

The English pronunciation of the neologism *Womanism/Mulherismo* curiously resembles the Portuguese word *humanismo* (“humanism”)—a significant coincidence, as womanism inherently carries a proposal of humanization. More than that, it calls for women to turn toward themselves in a process of self-humanization and affirmation as subjects. Within this movement, the abjection and objectification to which women have been historically subjected are problematized, mitigated, and potentially overcome.

Womanism is more than a strand of feminism directed at Black women. It is a plural perspective that encompasses diverse interpretations and approaches, such as theological womanism (Smith apud Phillips, 2006) and African womanism (Cledson-Weems apud Phillips, 2006), evidencing the multiplicity of views surrounding the concept. To understand it more deeply, one must return to its roots and formative characteristics. In this regard, Phillips (2006), when compiling a range of womanist theories, emphasizes that Alice Walker, through both her fictional and essayistic production, inaugurated a new way of addressing relationships among women, social transformation, the struggle against oppression, and a mission of humanitarian character. Walker did not create something entirely new—nor did other strands—but she named and consolidated attitudes, values, and convictions directed toward the promotion of justice and the construction of a more dignified world. This conception is already introduced in the opening section of her work.

That being said, what is womanism? Womanism is a social change perspective rooted in Black women’s and other women of color’s everyday experiences and everyday methods of problem solving in everyday spaces, extended to the problem of ending all forms of oppression for all people, restoring the balance between people and the environment/nature, and reconciling human life with the spiritual dimension. (Phillips, 2006, p. 20)

The womanist commitment extends beyond the individual, yet grounded in contextual, historical, and identity-based convictions, it often begins within immediate communities. Such practices of care and altruism assume the character of political activism, since social transformation necessarily involves questioning daily experiences (Phillips, 2006). Rather than a rhetorical stance, womanism functions as a philosophy shaping ways of being, thinking, and acting both individually and collectively.

Phillips (2006) systematizes this framework into five key dimensions: (1) opposition to all forms of oppression; (2) vernacular grounding in everyday and cultural experience; (3) non-ideological openness to multiple perspectives; (4) community orientation; and (5) spirituality. Although opposition to oppression may appear broad or generic, it is anchored in lived experience: the womanist subject has encountered or recognized subjugation, fostering both critical awareness and active resistance. Such resistance materializes through vernacular practices rooted in daily life and community-based knowledge, reaffirming the struggle for liberation.

Womanism, grounded in a plural and holistic perspective, rejects ideological rigidity. As non-ideological, it does not align with partisan radicalization, allowing diverse experiences and viewpoints to coexist and fostering dialogue and collective emancipatory action (Phillips, 2006). The communal aspect emphasizes the common good on three levels: self-identity, the collective self, and humanity. Rooted in the experiences of Black women and women of color, communalism functions as an ethical and political value that guides resistance and solidarity practices (Phillips, 2006).

The spiritual dimension highlights the interconnection between human life, living beings, and the material world. Beyond a strictly religious interpretation, spirituality complements political action, reinforcing it. Keating (2005 apud Phillips, 2006, p. 26) describes this as “spiritualized politics”, where social justice practices integrate transcendental and metaphysical dimensions to sustain activism.

Phillips (2006) emphasizes that womanism is not equivalent to feminism nor merely an extension of it. It constitutes a critical reformulation prioritizing the overcoming of everyday oppressions faced by women and other marginalized groups. As an inclusive project, womanism aims to restore balance in human relations, connect with the environment, and affirm spirituality, while maintaining its specificity as a theory, praxis, and identity emerging from the experiences of Black women, yet open to other contexts of oppression globally.

To conclude, who can be a womanist? The answer is simple yet meaningful: anyone may embrace womanism. However, it is important to recognize that, as evidenced by its defining characteristics, womanism extends beyond markers such as race and gender. Its construction and development have occurred—and continue to occur—within historical, social, and cultural contexts in which women of color have lived, continue to live, and resist daily, asserting their voices and advocating for justice within the possibilities available to them. It is essential to understand the various types of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), as this practice

constitutes one of the central themes of analysis in this article and is closely connected to the personal experiences of the author Alice Walker during her travels in Kenya. The following section aims to provide a concise yet critical overview of this profoundly complex and sensitive issue, highlighting its significance for the women directly affected and for all who engage with their experiences with empathy and scholarly attention.

Understanding the Female Genital Mutilation (FGM)

Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), also referred to as Female Genital Circumcision (FGC) or, more neutrally, Female Genital Cutting (FGC), is a complex practice rooted in cultural, religious, and social norms. Despite being frequently justified by tradition, FGM constitutes a form of physical and sexual violence against women and girls, and it remains prevalent in parts of Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2012), FGM includes all non-medical procedures involving partial or total removal of the external female genitalia, particularly the vulva. It is categorized into four types: Type I — Clitoridectomy (partial or total removal of the clitoris or its prepuce); Type II — Excision (partial or total removal of the clitoris and inner labia, sometimes including outer labia); Type III — Infibulation (narrowing of the vaginal opening through cutting and suturing, with or without clitoral removal); and Type IV — other harmful procedures without medical justification. The practice is generally enforced in early childhood, often before age six or, at most, adolescence, and is usually organized by family members, sometimes celebrated as a ritual with symbolic gifts and feasts.

The motivations for FGM are deeply embedded in cultural norms aimed at preserving chastity, regulating female sexuality, preparing for marriage, and reinforcing traditional gender roles. However, the procedure is performed without anesthesia, often using unsterilized instruments, such as scissors, blades, needles, or improvised threads, exposing girls to severe pain, hemorrhage, infection, and even death. Survivors frequently endure long-term physical complications, including difficulties in walking, urination, and menstruation, as well as sexual and obstetric problems. Psychosocial consequences include depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, and low self-esteem. Economic factors further complicate the issue, as substantial healthcare resources are required to treat affected individuals, and the proposed medicalization of FGM remains controversial, serving as a debated intermediate step toward eradication.

FGM is recognized internationally as a violation of human rights, and its elimination is a priority for global agencies, including the United Nations (UN) and the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF). WHO data indicate that in 31 countries across West, East, and Northeast Africa, as well as parts of the Middle East and Asia, over 230 million girls and women alive today have undergone FGM, with more than four million girls at risk annually (WHO, 2025). The UN’s Sustainable Development Goal 5, aiming for gender equality and empowerment of all women and girls by 2030, explicitly targets the elimination of harmful practices such as FGM (UN, 2015). Effective eradication strategies focus on education, integrating interdisciplinary knowledge from health, economics, law, and gender studies, as well as feminist and culturally sensitive approaches, given the practice’s lack of medical benefit and its profound socio-cultural implications.

In the following section, the novel *Possessing the Secret of Joy* will be explored through a detailed analytical lens, with counter-narratives offered to guide the reader toward a critical understanding of the text. Central to this discussion is Tashi, the protagonist, whose experiences with Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) within her Olinka community reveal the profound physical, psychological, and social repercussions of this practice. By engaging with these narratives, the section seeks to illuminate the intersections of cultural tradition, individual trauma, and resilience, providing a framework for a nuanced and empathetic reading that foregrounds both the personal and collective dimensions of FGM.

Unveiling Pain and Resilience: A Critical Encounter with *Possessing the Secret of Joy*

Published in 1992, *Possessing the Secret of Joy* is one of Alice Walker’s major novels, translated into Portuguese for the first time in 2022. The narrative centers on Tashi, a heroic protagonist and primary narrator, alongside eight other characters who witness or influence the unfolding events. Among them, the antagonist Tsunga M’Lissa (Mother Lissa) embodies a central conflict in Tashi’s life, while the remaining characters are secondary yet remain intimately connected to Tashi across the temporal and spatial dimensions of the story.

The novel spans just over three hundred pages and is divided into twenty-one sections. It is a polyphonic work, with nine narrators alternating in the first person, each chapter titled with the narrator’s name. This plural narrative structure foregrounds questions of identity, emphasizing the singularity of each voice. Tashi herself embodies a multiplicity of identities, being known as Tashi

(her African birth name), Evelyn (her American name), and Mrs. Johnson (her married surname). Her mother, Nafa, is also referred to as Catherine, and Tashi's son, Bentu Moraga, is commonly called Benny. These naming variations reflect Tashi's hybrid or plural identity, shaped by migration, cultural encounters, and her Christianization in the United States, illustrating the formative tensions of personal, religious, and social identity.

Temporality in the novel is predominantly psychological, aligned with the first-person singular perspective that privileges each narrator's subjective experience. Frequent flashbacks and memory-based recounting create a non-linear narrative that generates suspense and demands attentive, reflective reading (Eagleton, 2022). Walker's settings, both real and fictional, including the Olinka community with its distinct culture and language, situate the narrative within historical realism. The social and political backdrop of Olinka, alongside Tashi's movements to the United States and Switzerland, underscores the interplay between place, identity, and cross-cultural experience. Unlike some authors whose personal views may diverge from their fictional depictions, Walker's narrative demonstrates intentional coherence, with verisimilitude carefully crafted to reflect her literary and ethical aims (Eagleton, 2022).

The primary conflict of the novel is foreshadowed early, and what unfolds are the consequences of that conflict. Years pass, and Tashi marries Adam, giving the appearance of stability; yet, from the outset, it is evident that a traumatic event in Tashi's childhood has inflicted suffering on both her and those around her. Coupled with this is a profound desire to reconnect with her roots and cultural heritage. Eventually, Tashi decides to return to her homeland to undergo the Olinka female initiation rite, specifically infibulation, a form of genital mutilation typically performed in childhood or adolescence as a cultural marker for Olinka women. Having migrated to the United States at a young age and embraced Christianity, Tashi did not undergo the procedure earlier. As an adult, she chooses to submit to the practice, ostensibly as an affirmation of her cultural identity. However, throughout the narrative, it becomes clear that Tashi's unhappiness is intertwined with trauma—from her childhood, including the premature death of her sister Dura, to her adult life, shaped by the decision to confront genital mutilation.

Considering these developments, critical questions arise for a deeper understanding of the novel: Why does Tashi submit to genital mutilation? And ultimately, what is the "secret of joy," and to whom does it belong, within the context of the narrative's central themes and conflicts? The unfolding of Tashi's

story underscores *Possessing the Secret of Joy* as a paradigmatic example of Alice Walker's literary craft, where, despite a seemingly complex structure, the text engages with profound and challenging thematic content.

One productive approach to reading and analyzing this work is through the lens of womanism, a concept intimately linked to Walker and her literary production. The following section will explore this framework, highlighting how womanist thought illuminates the novel's engagement with identity, trauma, and resilience.

Tracing Womanist Voices: Critical Readings and Narrative Possibilities

This section aims to examine the relationship between the two forms of womanism previously discussed: the general conceptual framework and the specific perspective articulated by Alice Walker, exploring the tensions and interpretive possibilities that emerge from selected passages of the novel under analysis. Without claiming exhaustive depth, the analysis seeks to demonstrate how these womanist perspectives manifest within the narrative. In the dedication, Walker explicitly conveys her political and ethical stance, stating: "This book is tenderly and respectfully dedicated to the one who is blameless: the vulva" (Walker, 2022). The deliberate choice of words directly signals the author's opposition to female genital mutilation, while the very title of the work establishes a politically charged discourse of resistance. Womanism, in this context, emerges through the expressions of solidarity, shared suffering, and mutual reconstruction among female characters, as well as through their interactions with male characters, highlighting a dialogical, plural, and profoundly humanized approach to experiences of trauma and resilience.

Given that Tashi is the central character, it is no coincidence that the first sentence following the prologue is spoken by her: "It took me a long time to realize I was dead" (Walker, 2022, p. 15). This opening immediately signals the psychological density of the narrative. Tashi assumes the role of storyteller, employing language as a medium for subjective expression and symbolic construction. Her narrative is richly interwoven with mythical imagery and symbolic references to nonhuman beings, such as female panthers and leopards, which establish parallels with the human condition—particularly the female experience of pain, resistance, and transformation. Language, as a literary vehicle for human experience, gains prominence through its complexity and fragmentation, reflecting the character's internal psychological processes. In Walker's work, language is not separate from

literary art but constitutes a structuring element through which traumatic, emotional, and political experiences are represented and made intelligible.

Tashi's father asserted that a child who cries is like a rotten apple in the tribe's basket, and as long as this remained true, the community could not experience genuine happiness (Walker, 2022). This passage marks the first direct reference to a term associated with happiness and joy in the novel. Symbolically, it introduces the tension between individual suffering and the collective ideal of happiness imposed by cultural norms. The first explicit mention of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) arises through Olivia, Tashi's closest friend, who recalls their initial encounter. Olivia describes Tashi as profoundly grief-stricken over her sister Dura's death and the circulating rumors about the girl's final moments. Intriguingly, Olivia's account also reveals the cultural contradictions experienced by Tashi: while Dura's death is enveloped in pain, the girl is adorned, presented with gifts, and celebrated in a seemingly joyful rite of passage. This depiction exposes the painful reality of certain cultural practices in which FGM is socially framed as a celebratory ritual, concealing the physical and psychological violence it entails. Tashi's grief was suppressed for many years. Questions regarding her mother's death remain taboo in Olinka, a subject no one dared to broach for fear of the truth: "How did your mother die? It is a taboo question in Olinka. One that no one ever asked for fear of the answer" (Walker, 2022, p. 175), and more:

How could I believe that these were the same women I had known all my life? The same women who knew Dura? And whom Dura knew? Women for whom she bought matches or snuff every day, for whom she carried water jars on her head. It was a nightmare. Suddenly, it was forbidden to speak of my sister. Or to cry for her. (Walker, 2022, p. 29)

At one point, Tashi responds vehemently to Olivia's attempt to prevent her from proceeding to the camp for the ritual: "Who do you and your people think you are, not to accept us as we are? To never adopt any of our customs? It is always us who must change" (Walker, 2022, p. 37). This statement highlights Tashi's awareness of the historical and ongoing effects of colonialism and coloniality, which, according to Lugones (2010), constitute a system of power that enforces cultural, economic, and gender domination. Tashi's stance reveals the tensions inherent in a context shaped by Western modernity and processes of intercultural contact, in which relationships among subjects are mediated by hierarchies and dichotomies that reduce the other to a position of inferiority.

Tashi ultimately decides to undergo Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) in adulthood, a choice that reflects both a pursuit of cultural belonging and an attempt at identity affirmation. Even in the face of this decision, Adam, her partner, remains by her side, respecting both her choice and the cultural values she embodies. His attitude demonstrates a position of acceptance and understanding of the complex dilemmas Tashi confronts. Furthermore, Adam adopts a stance that might be considered heroic by choosing to accompany her to the camp where the procedure will take place. His concern for Tashi's safety and well-being compels him to face extreme risks, as the context of the ritual is complicated by an ongoing guerrilla conflict among the local communities. Tension escalates when Adam, perceived as an outsider, offers himself for recruitment as a means of ensuring his continued presence and his ability to protect Tashi. This episode exemplifies the interweaving of personal, cultural, and political conflicts that permeate the narrative, reflecting the layers of oppression and resistance that characterize the novel.

Tashi-Evelyn experiences, in a brutal and intimate way, the fragmentation of her cultural identity. Her decision to undergo FGM, specifically the most invasive and aggressive form—infibulation—has profound physical and emotional consequences. The narrative provides detailed accounts of the difficulties she encounters in performing basic bodily functions, such as urination, as well as the persistent discomfort caused by the odor resulting from the procedure. Pain while walking becomes a quotidian experience, normalized among the women of the Olinka community and even regarded as a symbol of honor. The manner of walking, marked by restrained and painful movements, becomes a visible sign of cultural belonging and purity, representing, in the eyes of the community, the essence of Olinka femininity. However, for Tashi, these physical traces are also daily reminders of her suffering and of an identity torn between the desire for belonging and the bodily trauma imposed upon her.

After years of physical and psychological suffering, Tashi, encouraged by close friends, decides to seek psychiatric treatment as a means of reconstructing her subjectivity. The protagonist's self-identification has always been shaped by her African heritage and her belonging to the Olinka community, where cultural markers and social roles are organized according to alternative logics of belonging. This complex identity becomes particularly evident during her therapy sessions with the psychiatrist, whom she calls Mzee—a figure inspired by the psychoanalyst Carl Gustav Jung (1875–1961) and his theories on anima and animus and the transcendence of the psyche. In the narrative, Mzee represents an analytical

gaze attempting to access Tashi's unconscious, exploring symbols, dreams, and repressed memories as a means of uncovering the deeper meanings of the trauma she carries. It is through this therapeutic process that Tashi embarks on a painful yet necessary journey of reframing her life story, confronting issues such as pain, guilt, coloniality, gender, and the imposition of cultural norms on female bodies³.

Tashi also learns from Pierre, her stepson, about the concept of the duality of the soul, in which the feminine aspect is represented by the clitoris and the masculine by the prepuce. During an intimate conversation, Pierre illustrates this duality by revealing his bisexuality, showing Tashi that such diversity need not be perceived as abnormal but can be approached naturally—just as one accepts biracial identity or dual nationality. Furthermore, Pierre, passionate about anthropology, shares with Tashi a mythological account regarding the origin of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), which is presented as follows:

At that moment, I looked up. Pierre continued: "A man's life was not capable of sustaining both beings: each person had to merge into the sex for which they seemed most suited." Then, Pierre said, closing the book but keeping his finger between the pages, a man is circumcised to free him from his femininity; a woman is circumcised to free her from her masculinity. In other words, he said, leaning forward in his chair, a long time ago, men found it necessary to permanently lock people into their obvious gender category, even while recognizing gender duality as something natural. (Walker, 2022, p. 191)

According to Pierre's account, which he shares with Tashi, at the origin of the universe, the planet Earth came into being when the god Amma threw a bit of clay, which transformed into the body of the Earth, represented as feminine. The Earth possessed a sexual organ symbolized by a termite mound—the clitoris was envisioned as a colony of termites. Amma sought to unite sexually with the Earth, but the termite mound rose, symbolizing her masculinity and preventing this divine union. For this reason, the Earth was circumcised, removing this obstacle. Tashi is initially surprised by this version of events but gradually opens to Pierre as they negotiate mutual understanding and respect for the differences that define them.

This narrative illustrates moments of convergence with a womanist perspective, particularly in the relationships the protagonist establishes with other characters. As Lugones (2010) asserts, this perspective reveals an active subjectivity, distinct

³ In the acknowledgments, Alice writes the following: "I thank Carl Gustav Jung for having (through reading) become so real in my self-therapy that I could imagine him alive and active in Tashi's treatment. This is my gift to him" (Walker, 2021, p. 305).

from modern subjectivity, which incorporates, at a minimum, the agency necessary for oppression and resistance to manifest actively. This dynamic is evident in the relationships that emerge from Tashi's fractured locus—her physical, relational, and emotional displacement—and contributes to alleviating, albeit partially, her suffering through the networks of support and acts of solidarity that surround her.

Confluences of Counternarratives in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*

It is essential to incorporate a culturally grounded perspective of African origin and authorship on the issue of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), thereby creating a space for counter-narratives that problematize the question of voice and representation in literature addressing specific peoples, places, and cultures. Given that the work under discussion is authored by an American writer, yet set in Africa with African characters—including the protagonist Tashi, her family, and the Olinka culture—moments arise throughout the narrative that reveal a so-called crisis of representation: tensions between the authorial voice and cultural fidelity that challenge how African identities, customs, and experiences are depicted and interpreted within the literary context.

This is because she uses language, discourse and epistemic modes of Western culture to nullify even the possibility of such things in Africa. The Africa she creates, like the Africa of colonialists, has no language, no people, no ideology and is instead what Achebe calls 'a place of negations' (Achebe 1988:2). The lack of a frame of reference for the Africans is one of the most limiting aspects of the novel. (Nako, 2003, p. 192)

The reception of *Possessing the Secret of Joy* demonstrates undeniable significance, with critical responses and scholarly analyses producing counter-narratives that interrogate both the representation of Female Genital Mutilation and the cultural elements depicted in the plot. These critiques reveal how, at times, the narrative leans toward a Western, Eurocentric perspective, contributing to broader debates on tensions between diverse cultural viewpoints and the need for a more plural and Africa-sensitive approach.

Nigerian theorist Oyěwùmí (2003), in the introduction to her work, emphasizes that African women embody feminist values related to agency and self-determination, even when these values are challenged by biased conceptions of hegemonic feminism. She particularly critiques the Western concept of gender,

which rigidly categorizes individuals and equates gender with biological sex. For Oyěwùmí, this perspective is deeply Western and intertwined with imperialist and colonial processes, producing a Eurocentric language—what she terms “Europolgy” (2003)—that renders alternative understandings of gender and social relations in African contexts invisible and delegitimized.

Oyěwùmí’s central aim is to question representations of Africa in both the novel and documentary texts, examining the constructed images of the continent and the strategies used to legitimize them—a process she describes as “inventing Africa” from Euro-American perspectives. In her critique, Oyěwùmí characterizes Alice Walker as a cultural imperialist and narcissist of contemporary American life, drawing parallels to Saartjie/Sarah Baartman. Baartman was removed from her community and exhibited in Europe for her “exotic” and hypersexualized body. Her body was objectified and treated as abject, failing to meet normative biological and aesthetic standards, leading to sexual abuse, physical mistreatment, and confinement in chains during public exhibitions in England. Even posthumously, her body was violated: English and French scientists removed her genitalia and other parts for experimentation.

Consequently, the narrative exhibits gaps in both environmental representation and the physical and psychological construction of certain characters and their motivations. A clear example is Tashi, whose name changes with her encounters across cultures: African-born Tashi; Evelyn in the United States and Europe; and, after marriage, Evelyn Johnson. These shifts mark her transformation as a cultural subject and reflect a hybrid identity. During psychiatric treatment, the doctor expresses stereotyped perceptions and Eurocentric assumptions, as evidenced in fragments of dialogue that follow:

“Black women,” the doctor said, “among all people, are considered the most difficult to analyze effectively. Do you know why? [...] The fact that I had only one child surprised him. He considered it unusual for a woman of color, whether married or not. ‘Your people like to have many children,’ he said. [...] Black women,” the doctor continued, noting my silence, “cannot be analyzed effectively because they are unable to blame their own mother” (Walker, 2022, p. 31–32).

The African settings, particularly the Olinka tribe, are depicted as dirty and inhospitable, marked by internal conflicts, guerrilla camps, and diseases such as the AIDS outbreak, symbolizing violence, threat, and precarious health conditions. In contrast, American environments are portrayed as protected spaces shaped by missionary work, featuring pleasant landscapes where Tashi is encouraged

to seek psychological treatment, symbolizing safety and well-being. Moreover, two missionaries oppose Olinka customs, such as facial scarification and genital mutilation, aiming to eradicate these practices through the Christianization of the community. From a non-Western perspective, this represents sociocultural interference. The notion that the Olinkas are few and easily persuaded, according to Oyěwùmí (2003), reduces Africa to a small, homogeneous village, disregarding its vast linguistic and cultural diversity.

Lisette, a French feminist, bourgeois, and independent, maintains a positive relationship with her son Pierre from pregnancy onward. In contrast, Tashi struggles during her pregnancy and in raising Benny. Pierre and Lisette attempt to support Tashi/Evelyn in managing her emotional pain, particularly the young anthropologist, who has been intrigued by her since childhood, as described by his father, Adam:

From the moment Pierre, still a boy, heard about Tashi's dark tower and her terror, her sufferings never left his mind. Everything he learns, no matter how trivial, in whatever context or with whomever, he transfers to her dilemma. The conversations we have as adults inevitably include information, he has kept so that it becomes part of solving Tashi's enigma. (Walker, 2022, p. 196)

In Lisette's case, however, African feminists view such relationships as the burden placed on white women to "save" non-white women, portraying Western societies as the sole spaces where women's rights are guaranteed. The issue lies not only in what is represented but in how these elements are narrated, leaving room for critical questioning and interpretive gaps. Thus, it is essential to understand the history and social organization of these cultures. A theoretically and culturally informed approach to corporeality, alongside the Western-centered focus on the body, illuminates the stakes in the novel: Tashi's body and her right to self-determination. Historically, among the Kikuyu of Kenya, both women and men underwent genital modification, practices that symbolized anticolonial resistance and communal unity. This understanding extends beyond the physical or material dimension, situating the practice within a cultural framework. Consequently, Tashi's decision to undergo the procedure can be interpreted as a decolonial act, as indicated by the markers present in the following passage:

Ah, I say. These colonial cannibals. Why can't they just steal our lands, dig up our gold, cut down our forests, pollute our rivers, enslave us to work on their

plantations, fuck us, devour our flesh, and leave us in peace? Why do they also have to write about how much joy we possess? (Walker, 2022, p. 290)

Anticolonialism permeates the discourse of the novel, reflecting African struggles for independence alongside the influence of autocratic tendencies in certain societies, such as the Mau Mau uprising and other authoritarian leaders, as well as systems that define roles and anticolonial practices. However, it can be inferred that coloniality persists in some Western constructions, which position themselves as legitimate producers of knowledge deemed valid and scientific—what is termed the coloniality of knowledge. Additionally, the novel features an epigraph that directly references the title⁴:

Black people are natural; they possess the secret of joy, which explains how they are able to endure the suffering and humiliations inflicted upon them. They are vigorous, physically and emotionally, which makes them easy to live with. But I had not yet learned to deal with their cunning and their natural instinct for self-preservation. (Ricciardi, 1987 apud Walker, 2022, p. 6)

The epigraph chosen by Alice Walker functions subtly as a literary device of irony and critique. By asserting that “the secret of joy lies with Black people,” the author prompts critical reflection on colonialist language that has historically dehumanized—and continues to dehumanize—racialized bodies. At first glance, the statement suggests that the capacity to endure historical violence and oppression is an almost intrinsic attribute of Blackness. However, this notion becomes problematic, as it reduces complex human experiences to an essentialized skin color, potentially aligning with discourses of racism and eugenics.

It is more coherent to understand resilience—both personal and collective—as a social, historical, and political construct. Resilience is the human capacity to resist oppression through organization, struggle, and the assertion of rights. Rather than a romanticized utopia, this resistance is concretely visible in social movements and women’s mobilizations across contexts, where voices and practices demonstrate autonomy and agency. Consequently, it is crucial to challenge culturally imperialist perspectives that claim to speak for other women or peoples, assuming their incapacity for self-definition and protagonism.

Walker’s novel reflects her authorial subjectivity and the political purpose guiding her writing. Nevertheless, it is not without contradictions and has

⁴ From 1940 to 1952, the Kenya Land and Freedom Army (KLFA) initiated a militant struggle for land rights and freedom.

therefore been subject to critique and counter-narratives, particularly regarding the complexity surrounding Female Genital Mutilation (FGM). Throughout the text, Tashi's interpersonal relationships—whether in friendship, marriage, or motherhood—manifest as affective networks grounded in confidentiality, complicity, forgiveness, and mutual admiration. These bonds not only sustain her agency throughout the narrative but also reinforce her resistance to multiple forms of oppression. It is precisely through these connections that Tashi finds the strength to assert her subjectivity and her right to full existence, despite physical and emotional suffering. Her trajectory culminates symbolically and emphatically on the novel's final page, where, in capital letters, the answer to the central question of the narrative is finally revealed: "RESISTANCE IS THE SECRET OF JOY!" (Walker, 2022, p. 300).

Final Considerations

The final words on this theme express that personal values, beliefs, and subjectivity are inseparable from literary creation, as they shape not only the writer's worldview but also the symbolic frameworks through which readers engage with the text. By invoking her ancestry, Walker builds symbolic allusions that, though initially aimed at herself, extend to her readers—particularly those engaged with the lyrical subjects inhabiting her works, characters who defy taboos and challenge entrenched social prejudices.

This study highlighted the complexity of addressing Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), a practice that transcends cultural and geographical boundaries while operating across social, political, and symbolic dimensions. Literature proves essential here: it allows the crossing of diverse realities and broadens perspectives on plural forms of existence. *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (2022), although written by an African American author, denounces the persistence of FGM since the 1990s, yet it also drew criticism from African thinkers such as Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí, who questioned the representational contradictions of Walker's work, particularly when contrasting African contexts with the Eurocentric and North American frameworks in which Tashi's transculturation occurs.

From these analyses, it becomes clear that the novel exposes tensions and contradictions within human relations, particularly regarding cultural and identity formation. This research considered multiple perspectives: some view Walker's narrative as a dialogic womanist stance, while others, grounded in African feminist knowledge, present critical objections. Such intersections foster a critical reading

of resistance literature, attentive to its varied meanings and receptions. Within this framework, Walker's womanism and Oyèwùmí's theoretical contributions are vital for rethinking intercultural practices based on dialogue, empathy, solidarity, and respect. Acknowledging the tensions between womanisms and feminisms—their convergences, divergences, and nuances—enables recognition of the fractured locus of being, knowledge, and power, illuminating the plurality of voices and diverse realities that enrich both the literary field and human coexistence.

Taken together, these approaches provide analytical tools to reassess cultural and literary narratives that confront oppression and advance a more plural, situated, and critical reading of the struggle against FGM. This practice, by its very nature, constitutes a direct violation of women's right to bodily autonomy and self-determination. Within Walker's novel, the principles of womanism are consistently evident: the denunciation of all forms of oppression, the valorization of vernacular knowledge rooted in racialized women lived experiences, and the refusal of rigid ideological dogmas in favor of life-based practices. Such elements sustain an active subjectivity and agency that, even amid adversity, become the ground for resistance. Ultimately, this process reveals what Walker names the true "secret of joy": the capacity to reframe pain and discover renewed meaning in both individual and collective experiences.

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