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# Female Agency in Religious Disassembly of Culture: Where Do Women Fit In?

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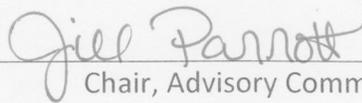
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Megan E. Kirby

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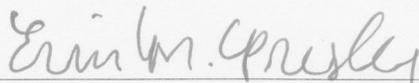
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Female Agency in Religious Disassembly of Culture:

Where do Women Fit In?

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Bachelors of Arts

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## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my husband and children  
who supported me throughout this journey and to  
my parents who always believed I could do it

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Jill Parrott for her unwavering support throughout this process. She was an inspiration to me in my first semester at ECU and continues to be even now. I would also like to thank Dr. Erin Presley and Dr. Tom Butler for their comments and support throughout this past year. My committee was truly one of a kind in their encouragement and support of my goals. I would also like to thank my husband and kids who endured late nights, lots of pizza, and weekends full of books and writing instead of zoo trips and vacations. Finally, I would like to thank my parents who helped support me and my family through this degree because they believe in the best for all of their daughters.

## Abstract

This thesis is a venture into cultural studies through the lens of literature using the texts *The Color Purple* and *Possessing the Secret of Joy* by Alice Walker. The study focuses on the impact of Western missionaries on the various African cultures during the time period of the novels, specifically regarding whether or not the missionaries were able to improve the quality of life and agency of women within the existing cultures. Literary criticism and historical accounts focus the thesis on and illuminate both fictional women in the Walker novels and women existing in the real-life cultures at that time. The findings focused on the outcome for women in the Walker novels as well as women existing in the real-life cultures. Particular attention was given to whether or not women as a group benefited from missions work or suffered harm.

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## **Introduction**

Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple* and the second novel continuing the story of Tashi, *The Secret of Possessing Joy*, are ripe with intersections between post-colonialism and feminism. The goal of this research is to explore the role of Western Protestant missionaries in creating, destroying, or commuting female agency within culture. As Protestant missionaries entered Africa and began replacing traditional practices, such as female genital mutilation, and traditional religion with Western ideas about tradition and religion, women were forced to choose a side. In choosing to remain true to their own culture, it was possible for women to maintain a kind of agency within the loyal faction. In choosing to adopt Western ideals, women could in turn adopt a new agency within a new culture. However, either choice led women into situations where they were still under the power of one societal expectation or another. The question then becomes which choice is better for a woman in this situation, and the answer is oftentimes that there is no good choice. Having discovered this, consider what Western missionaries brought to the table that they felt would empower women. The end of female genital mutilation began with Western missionaries, but as this practice died, women suffered a figurative circumcision of their culture in order to be adopted into Western society.

The term "female genital mutilation" is a term ascribed to the practice of female circumcision by opponents of the practice. Those who do not oppose the practice or who view it from a neutral territory view this terminology as unnecessarily offensive and instead refer to the practice as "female circumcision" equating it to the practice of male circumcision. The two are differentiated for opponents of the practice due to the suffering that is often involved. Female circumcision can include excising only a portion of the

clitoris or removing all external signs of female genitals and sewing up the entrance. Tashi experienced the latter, we are told, which complicated her life as a young woman and led to the intellectual disability of her child. Other potential outcomes include infection, deformity, increased gynecological problems, and death. For the purposes of this thesis, the terminology “female genital mutilation” will be used as Alice Walker’s work is the primary focus and she is a vocal critic of this practice.<sup>1</sup>

Through this disassembly of one group of related cultures—African and the integration into another group of related cultures—Western—women continue to be disregarded as capable of their own agency within existing societies. Western culture, in this case, is a generalized term used to describe the imperialism that began with European nations such as the Netherlands, France, and Britain and then continued with the United States. All of these nations were interested in the resources that Africa could provide, not least of which was its people. While physical resources were mined, both the Europeans and Americans used slave labor to build industry. Likewise, African culture is a generalized term to describe a greatly varying people from one country to another. Both Alice Walker and Chinua Achebe have referenced the Igbo tribe in their work. The Igbo tribe at the time of Walker’s writing was one of the largest and most widespread tribes in Africa. This tribe inhabited many African nations, such as: Nigeria, Liberia, Cameroon, and Equatorial Guinea but maintained similar practices and beliefs.

Women who were assimilated into European or American culture from the Igbo

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<sup>1</sup> Evidence will be presented to suggest that this judgment is made without a full understanding of the cultural implications as is often the case when Western society intervenes in cultures that are not their own.

African tradition continued to be dictated to by a culture largely decided by men, traditionally known as patriarchal. However, regardless of the culture these women did continue to be capable of critical thought and of powerful roles. In Walker's fictional account, *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, M'lisa, who performed the genital mutilation surgery on both Tashi and Tashi's sister, is one such example of a powerful woman in a male dominated culture. In order to gain this power she had to unsex all women within her culture through genital mutilation. These women may have maintained the femininity that men of the tribe found pleasing but were disallowed from experiencing their own sexual pleasure. M'lisa's role essentially made her an ally in this transgression with the men of the tribe thus in at least one sense she had a measure of equality. This adherence to the male ideal gave her agency within her own culture, which is why she chose to remain within that culture even as the West literally surrounded her. M'lisa maintained an awareness that the West would frown on this tradition through her experience with former missionaries. This is true for Tashi as well, who finds her agency in making the choice to kill M'lisa. By killing M'lisa, Tashi is finally able to embrace the Western culture that she so loves through such a powerful rejection of her own culture. Though M'lisa's death does not un-circumcise Tashi literally, she is able to regain some of the persona taken from her through this act. However, she then loses all agency by becoming imprisoned. Tashi went from a figurative prison to a literal prison but the fact remains that she is one of the sadder characters in literature due to the very brief experience of freedom she had as a youth with Adam. Being intimate with him and rejecting her culture for him led to what Tashi believed to be a lifetime of punishment for transgressions. Believing that she was never destined to be joyful it must have been a shock when prior

to her death Olivia explains to her that resistance is the secret of joy. Tashi seems to accept this notion and is finally at peace in her death.

To enter into this discussion I am arguing that neither set of cultural perspectives—the Western ones nor the African ones—are superior to the other in that they both limit the potential of the women residing within them. Past arguments by female scholars, including Alice Walker as indicated in her fictional works and in *Warrior Marks*, argue that the cultural tradition of circumcision is somehow indicative of a culture that needs to be saved by the West. While this thesis will certainly not be arguing for the continuation of the practice of FGM, the idea of Western thought and culture as superior is bogus. *The Color Purple* clearly illustrates the problems that were prominent in the Western cultures at the time. Women of color were being raped, disrespected, used as slaves by white people and by men of color, and suffering any number of injustices as some of the most vulnerable members of society. It would seem that these problems would be worth solving before solving the problems of other cultures and people.

The argument for this thesis is multi-faceted. As such, the argument has been divided into two parts to differentiate the conversation as needed:

1.) The first part of the argument will address the idea that Western missionaries had an impact on female agency in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, *The Color Purple* and in *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe, though in a different way. The viewpoints expressed in each of these novels offer a great contrast. As such it is interesting to note that the positive impact on female agency by the West is shown by a male author, Chinua Achebe, while the negative impact on female agency is shown by a female author, Alice

Walker. Also noteworthy is that Chinua Achebe is of Nigerian descent while Walker is an American. Additionally, according to *Postcolonial African Writers*, Chinua Achebe was raised in a Christian home and his father (an orphan) was converted to Christianity by missionaries that entered Africa. No mention is made of religious tradition concerning the family of Walker in biographical information. These differing perspectives provide a unique point of view that should be considered before judging or condemning a society or practice.

2.) Secondly, this text will argue that women are viewed as commodities in Western cultures and in African cultures, which results in the missionaries not having the moral high ground that they pretended to possess. This is illustrated by the notion that slavery and rape are not superior to genital mutilation as they are both forms of female abuse that were happening in the West, specifically in America, in the time period of *The Color Purple* and *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. The bartering of women seen in *The Color Purple* is evidence that women have no agency in the West just as there is very little agency in Africa. This realization may make Westerners feel superior but in reality there are problems in both cultures that should be addressed. Often the problems of the West would accompany the West upon entering Africa. Though missionaries did not traditionally rape or enslave members of the African culture, other members of Western society such as tradesmen or soldiers often did. This behavior could taint the message of Christ and convince African women that to be Christian meant to be in servitude to men. What then would be the incentive to leave a culture belonging to them if there was no freedom to be gained? This is often why women were bribed with healthcare and social services that were previously unavailable.

The sources used to support these arguments are primarily written by individuals of African descent, meaning authors that come from the varying backgrounds and cultures that make up the African continent. These writings offer either support or rebuke to the points made by Walker (an American from the South) in her fictional accounts as well as the non-fiction work completed in conjunction with Pratibha Parmar- *Warrior Marks: Female Genital Mutilation and the Sexual Binding of Women*. In addition, each of these arguments will be viewed through the lens of theories proposed by Homi Bhabha and Chandra T. Mohanty. Bhabha offers an objective way to look at the impact of culture on the female experience by providing a way to reconcile the two perspectives as they exist within the individual and within the culture as a whole. Mohanty takes Bhabha's ideas a step further by addressing feminist concerns as they apply in a postcolonial environment. Mohanty is a proponent of the idea that Western culture fails to recognize the diversity of women that are not of Western origin and instead lumps them all together as one overarching "other." She argues that this kind of thought process keeps women of color from achieving agency as the world becomes increasingly westernized. Building on the ideas of Bhabha, Mohanty is able to provide a means by which the diversity of each character in the works of Alice Walker can be deconstructed and viewed as unique which, in turn, offers this perspective for use in real world applications as women of color continue to be marginalized. In fact, Mohanty states the following as a goal of her writing, "Western feminisms appropriate and 'colonize' the constitutive complexities which characterize the lives of women in these countries. It is in this process of discursive homogenization and systematization of the oppressions of women in the third world that power is exercised in much of recent Western feminist discourse, and this

power needs to be defined and named” (54). This definition of power allows women who are not white to enter into the conversation equally and distinguish themselves as individuals with viewpoints that are deserving of agency, if not in society, then at least in the conversation of womanism that is so deeply concerning to their futures and to the generations that will follow.

Womanism is a feminist term coined by Alice Walker. It is a reaction to the realization that ‘feminism’ does not encompass the perspectives of Black women. It is a feminism that is ‘stronger in color’, nearly identical to ‘Black Feminism’. However, Womanism does not need to be prefaced by the word ‘Black’, the word automatically concerns black women. Womanism addresses the racist and classist aspects of white feminism and actively opposes separatist ideologies. It includes the word ‘man’, recognizing that Black men are an integral part of Black women’s lives as their children, lovers, and family members. (A Feminist Theory Dictionary)

Womanism is a discussion of community where as Black Feminism is often perceived as divisive because it pits men and women against one another. Womanists place the focus on black women and men helping each other up out of oppressive cultures and environments.

## Literature Review: Fiction

The fiction that inspired this research is primarily authored by Alice Walker. Though the more famous work, *The Color Purple*, is where the character of Tashi originates, the primary focus of this research was the following and lesser known novel *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, which further details the struggle of Tashi between her own culture and the Western culture brought to her through the missionaries and their children. Walker is quick to point out that *Possessing the Secret of Joy* is not, in fact, a sequel to *The Color Purple* but rather a separate exploration of Tashi's story. In *The Color Purple* Tashi is a young girl in Africa when the missionaries arrive and begin the process of attempting to change ideals and traditions held by Tashi's tribe. Tashi herself has not yet been a victim of genital mutilation but she did witness her sister's death as a result of this practice. This moment is the source of much of Tashi's inner conflict and comes up repeatedly throughout the novel. It is also important to note that after her sister's death Tashi's mother, Catherine, did not press Tashi to have the surgery though it was an expectation for women of the tribe.

Tashi makes fast friends with the children of the missionaries, Adam and Olivia. She enjoys their company and seems to embrace the Westernization of her tribe. However, toward the end of the novel, when Tashi is no longer a child, she becomes overwhelmed by the greed of Western society as roads begin moving through the ancestral lands of her people without regard for the importance of the land. When the roads push through the fields containing the sacred roofleaf, Tashi is inspired to fight for her own culture.

Tashi joins a band of fighters that sabotage the efforts of the West and, in an act of rebellion, Tashi asks the same woman who circumcised her child sister to circumcise Tashi herself. Since Tashi and Adam have already been together intimately this decision is a definite blow as Tashi is aware of what she is giving up. In fact she almost feels obligated to “pay for her sins” as she slept with Adam in the fields where the road came through and she cursed their land by doing so. This circumcision is a rejection of the Western culture that Tashi feels has betrayed her. It is also a rejection of Adam whom she feels is a representation of the West and with whom she desecrated the land. Tashi also has ceremonial lacerations put on her face and, to show solidarity, Adam does this as well when Tashi returns so that she will still know that she is loved and accepted. Unfortunately this is not enough for Tashi as she continues to experience physical, mental, and emotional scarring from this decision for the rest of her life.

Alternatively, in this same novel we are privy to the story of Celie, Nettie, and Shug. All three of these women are of color, living in the deep south, in the 1930s. Though slavery has ended these women are bartered, traded, and used from the first page of the book. Celie is the narrator and she confesses to being a lesbian and although she is not allowed by the men in her life or by society in general to act on these feelings she eventually does. Nettie is very intelligent and Celie protects her little sister so that she is able to finish her education and become a missionary in Africa where she meets Tashi. Nettie remarks on her arrival at Africa that she is treated as white by the “natives.” She is stunned by this as she was hoping to identify with her counterparts easily but instead finds that Western culture is a big gulf to navigate to reach the people in her new home. Shug seems to be the only woman in the novel that is self-actualized. Though she

struggles and has often lived a life based on objectification, she has found a way to make all of this work in her favor. She has become independent and has enough money to support herself as well as anyone else she chooses to support. Shug's ability to overcome what society has deemed appropriate for herself and Celie enable them to pursue a relationship and escape the world of men. Without Shug's agency through her own self-actualization, Celie would not have been able to realize her own desires and a capacity for a truly loving relationship. When Shug and Celie are no longer beholden to the desires of the men they are surrounded by they are able to build successful and happy lives, which is evidence of the constraints put in place by men, society in general, religion, and expectations during the time period of this novel. With Shug's help Celie is able to escape from her unhappy marriage and build a business selling pants.<sup>2</sup> After an inheritance and the success of her business, Celie has her own home and is able to live independently just as Shug does. Eventually Shug and Celie come together after Shug's dalliances with a much younger man who discards her. Celie is able to forgive the woman who taught her love. Nettie is with her missionary husband after the death of his wife, and most of the other characters in the book seem to have found relative happiness- even the men who learn a little bit about respect. However, this happiness is short-lived for Tashi who is still suffering from her experiences in Africa. At the end of *The Color Purple* we see her arrive in America with her new husband, Adam.

This leads to the next novel *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. This novel is the primary focus of this work as it portrays a different kind of societal restraint in the form of the rejection of Western culture as a duty, in favor of physical and sexual restraint as a

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<sup>2</sup> Pants for women. This was a joke to the men in the novel until Celie became successful.

badge of honor. Tashi, as described above, decides on genital mutilation as an act of honor in keeping with the traditions of the Olinka people. There are both immediate and long lasting ramifications from this decision. The immediate ramifications are physical. Tashi is sore, can no longer walk the way she did previously due to pain, and she is no longer capable of the sexual pleasure which she had so enjoyed with Adam. Adam is at first accepting of this change even though he had warned Tashi against it. This acceptance seems to remain but Adam begins to struggle with the lack of intimacy. Tashi struggles with the lack of pleasure in intimacy as she had previously experienced it in the roofleaf fields, but intercourse has now transitioned to a utilitarian and painful practice.

The longer lasting ramifications include the difficult birth of Benny who is developmentally delayed due to the struggle caused by the genital mutilation. Benny is not able to exit the birth canal easily and is deprived of oxygen for a long enough period of time to cause cognitive delay. Tashi and Adam both blame themselves for this development, which eventually results in resentment that builds between Tashi and Adam leading to a divide that becomes more and more difficult to breach. Another long term effect is the disintegration of the relationship with Adam as a result of this gap. With a lack of intimacy and even, mental or emotional connection, Adam eventually seeks out a mistress, Lisette. This move by Adam only intensifies Tashi's feelings of inner conflict and shame. When Lisette gives birth to a healthy son, Pierre, Tashi becomes increasingly upset and begins seeing a psychiatrist. Tashi sees Lisette and her son Pierre as what could have been for she and Adam had the genital mutilation not occurred. However, this is a vicious cycle because the thought that the mutilation caused the divide and subsequent problems leads to the idea that the mutilation would not have occurred had the West not

tried to squash the Olinkas. It is a circle of defeat that leaves Tashi pulled in two directions with no clear idea of exactly what she wants or where she fits in.

Upon the death of her psychiatrist and Adam's mistress, Tashi does come to accept Pierre as he and Benny grow close. She begins to see Benny as a part of the family because of the way he cares for Benny and even for Tashi herself. Tashi also begins to regret her disdain for Lisette after Lisette has died because she realizes that Lisette had tried to reach out to her and had been a source of comfort for Adam. While this may seem counterintuitive, to Tashi it makes sense because she viewed herself as insufficient for meeting Adam's needs. This internal struggle eventually leads Tashi to M'lisa. M'lisa is the woman who performed the mutilation on her as well as her sister, resulting in the death of Tashi's sister. Tashi views M'lisa as the embodiment and cause of her struggle. She sees M'lisa as all that is wrong with African culture and spends several days with M'lisa discussing the events of her sister's death as well as the act of female genital mutilation. Tashi eventually smothers M'lisa to death just as she smothers the struggle inside herself and is finally able to embrace the West through the notion that resistance is the secret of joy. Tashi is imprisoned for the murder. The idea of resistance as joy is presented to Tashi in prison by Olivia and is the last thing she sees before her death via a banner created by Olivia, Adam, and Pierre. Tashi does finally seem to find peace as she faces her own death, perhaps viewing it as the only peace she was capable of receiving.

While *The Color Purple* is an indictment of the treatment of women of color in Western society and *Possessing the Secret of Joy* is an indictment of expectations for women in Africa, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is another story of the conflict that

occurs when Westerners try to subvert existing cultures. This tale focuses on the experiences of a man, Okonkwo, who finds that he is suddenly less valued when his culture is disassembled by Western Missionaries. The Missionaries enter the culture and provide the women, especially young girls, with the opportunity to obtain education which empowers the older women (Okonkwo's wives) to advocate for their daughters and sons.<sup>3</sup> Okonkwo slowly loses his grip on power. This is partly due to the influence of the missionaries but is also the result of a quickly changing world. With the Missionaries came education, development, and jobs. Okonkwo's success and heroism within the tribe was based on his ability to fight and hunt. These skills simply had less value in a changing world and left him feeling like a failure. Since he had worked his whole life to overcome the bad reputation of his own father and make a success of himself, failure was simply not an option he could live with. While this novel is not a primary focus of this research it is important for offering contrast. Women in this novel benefited from the influence of Western ideas because unsettling the power that men like Okonkwo held in the existing society opened a power vacuum that reduced sexism and offered a way out (or up). Okonkwo's wives and children no longer had to fear him as options became

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<sup>3</sup> "In this way Mr. Brown learned a good deal about the religion of the clan and he came to the conclusion that a frontal attack on it would not succeed. And so he built a school and a little hospital in Umofia. He went from family to family begging people to send their children to his school. But at first they only sent their slaves or sometimes their lazy children. Mr. Brown begged and argued and prophesied. He said that the leaders of the land in the future would be men and women who had learned to read and write. If Umofia failed to send her children to the school, strangers would come from other places to rule them. They could already see that happening in the Native Court, where the D.C. was surrounded by strangers who spoke his tongue. Most of these strangers came from the distant town of Umuru on the bank of the Great River where the white man first went.

In the end Mr. Brown's arguments began to have an effect. More people came to learn in his school, and he encouraged them with gifts of singlets and towels. They were not all young, these people who came to learn. Some of them were thirty years old or more. They worked on their farms in the morning and went to school in the afternoon. And it was not long before the people began to say the white man's medicine was quick in working." (181)

available and as a result of this loss of power Okonkwo ends up taking his own life.

Okonkwo's wives and children have an improved situation no longer being subject to his domineering. Even by his death they are not left ruined as they once may have been as he is not the only source of provision.

## **Literature Review: A Theoretical Framework**

This fiction will be considered through the theories of Homi Bhabha and Chandra Mohanty. Bhabha's theory has five parts that will be used in this research to separate the arguments. These parts are as follows: hybridity, ambivalence, cultural difference, mimicry, and third space. Hybridity is "the revaluation of the assumption of colonial identity through the repetition of discriminatory identity effects. It displays the necessary deformation and displacement of all sites of discrimination and domination. It unsettles the mimetic or narcissistic demands of colonial power but reimplicates its identifications in strategies of subversion that turn the gaze of the discriminated back upon the eye of power" (Bhabha 160). To clarify the idea of hybridity states that when a dominant culture attempts to replace a whole or parts of a culture with alternate practices they end up keeping or renaming large parts of the culture which they are trying to subvert, which, in turn, shows weakness and vulnerability. An example known by many is the celebration of Christmas. Christmas is labeled as a Christian holiday due to its correlation with the birth of Jesus Christ. However, the Christmas tree is a remnant of the pagan traditions that the then missionaries allowed to be a part of the celebration in order to find a compromise so that conversion would not be rejected overall. This is recognition of weakness displayed as it proves that the missionaries were inherently aware that a complete rejection of tradition would cause the people existing in the culture to rebel. In order to avoid this rebellion the missionaries compromised by allowing parts of the culture to stay which, perhaps without complete awareness, displayed to the people within the existing culture a personal victory. However, this perceived victory—at least within the works of Alice

Walker—quickly spelled defeat as religious conversion became more and more intertwined with imperialist goals.

Ambivalence is the discussion of culture as an existing duality within colonized people. A hybridity of sorts is created within the person that adopts portions of the new culture and then blends with their own existing culture. This duality at a societal level is shown as a repetition of the familiar with the idea that the culture is being transformed into something new. Tashi was a walking study in ambivalence which resulted in great inner conflict over her cultural identity. This duality within Tashi was not so much a blend as two separate and competing parts. Tashi found herself embracing the West due to her love of Adam and Olivia and the rejection she faced from her mother and neglect of her tribe. In an effort to reconnect with her mother and tribe Tashi finds herself returning to the culture she was raised in while in love with a man who eventually pulls her from her home and into a completely new and different land and culture. At this point the duality within Tashi becomes nearly unbearable.

Cultural difference as described by Bhabha is the point where two cultures meet where dominance is established. This is the point at which dominance demands concessions and one culture suffers a partial loss of identity. This is illustrated in *Possessing the Secret of Joy* on a visceral level when the Western road plows through the roofleaf field, which is sacred to the Olinka people. This happens on the promise of progress but the people are displaced and suffer as a result. The dominance of the West is displayed by the disregard for the sacred traditions of the Olinka tribe, the broken promise of progress as it applies to the Olinka tribe, and the sheer strength that is evident

in the disbursement of a hundreds of years old people. This established dominance causes the Olinka people to lose a large part of their identity as the roofleaf fields are destroyed. These fields are described as being an integral part of the Olinka culture. People can be cursed for disturbing them and they are literally worshiped as a source of provision for the tribe. When the missionaries come they do not disturb this practice but rather work around it in an attempt to maintain relations. However, imperialism dominates in the end and the missionary influence pales in comparison to the promise of progress and financial recompense. The Olinka tribe is forced to give up their roofleaf fields as well as their homes as the new road plows through the middle of both literally ripping the tribe into two pieces, a split between the old and new ways.

Mimicry occurs when the colonized society begins to mimic the behavior and traditions of the colonial society. Likewise the colonizers begin to mimic parts of the society which they have infiltrated. This mimicry between the two cultures acts as a kind of bandaid to facilitate acceptance. While neither culture is fully adopting the practices of the other, both cultures can see themselves mirrored in the other which disrupts authority and leads to an, often suppressed, realization of equality. In *The Color Purple*, the Olinka tribe does halt the practice of female genital mutilation when the missionaries are in residence. Likewise the missionaries live amongst the people in a traditional house and eat the same food. However, this breaks down once other Westerners begin to assert dominance as mentioned above. This causes the Olinka to revert to their primary cultural practices and the missionaries to eventually leave.

Finally, Third Space is the area where two cultures meet and where colonial authority can be accepted or challenged. This area as described by Bhabha is a space rife with tension and competition where hybrid identities are created. Tashi is a physical representation of the Third Space within *The Color Purple* and *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. However, the initial meeting of the missionaries with the Olinka seems to be a positive experience for most. There is some tension about education for young girls but this seems to be decided on an individual basis. However, this did cause tension for some families. Tashi's mother was wary but eventually agreed to allowing Tashi to continue her education. Upon making this decision she distanced herself from Tashi. In addition, there is the example of the Western society that came after the missionaries. The imperialist groups that pushed the road through the roofleaf fields are truly responsible for the intersection of culture where authority was challenged. This is when the band of fighters rose up from various tribes. This is when Tashi joined that band and made the decision to alter her body in solidarity with her home which she felt to be threatened. This was the point in the novel, for the character Tashi, the missionaries, Adam and Olivia where the "space" literally became "rife with tension and competition." This is also where Tashi's hybrid identity was created as she was forced to choose between her own identity as an Olinka and that which she had embraced through Adam.

Mohanty builds on the ideas of Bhabha by bringing feminism to an intersection with his postcolonialist ideas. While Mohanty is critical of Western feminism as exclusive to the needs of women of color around the world she is also providing an education through this collection of essays so that that might change. By bringing awareness to the topic she hopes to unify feminism rather than create division. She

explains in her introductory essay for the collection that “How we conceive of definitions and contexts, on what basis we foreground certain contexts over others, and how we understand the ongoing shifts in our conceptual cartographies-these are all questions of great importance in this particular cartography of third world feminisms” (Mohanty 3).

She goes on to extrapolate that,

The idea of imagined community is useful because it leads us away from essentialist notions of third world feminist struggles, suggesting political rather than biological or cultural basis for alliance. Thus, it is not color or sex which constructs the ground for these struggles. Rather, it is the *way* we think about race, class, and gender- the political links we choose to make among and between struggles. Thus, potentially, women of all colors (including white women) can align themselves with and participate in these imagined communities. (4)

Through this explanation of goals Mohanty is clear that all women should have rights to the conversation as active participants rather than being guided by patriarchal societal expectations and/or ideas.

Connecting Mohanty to the works of Alice Walker reveals that, though Tashi is quite different culturally from Olivia, Nettie, Celie, Shug, or any of the other women within this story, they should all be able to participate in the conversation concerning their own agency and rights within the world as a global cultural concern. In the timeframe presented in the novels the Western culture was still devaluing women as a whole but especially those of color. In fact, within their own community women of color were devalued by the men who asserted dominance. When the Western culture literally

plows through the roofleaf fields outside the Olinka village all of the people within the culture are basically collateral damage but women and girls who have been left uneducated, are unable to fight, and do not have agricultural means of support are left without rights or means of support and remain at the mercy of patriarchal ideals.

## Literature Review: Female Genital Mutilation

*Warrior Marks: Female Genital Mutilation and the Sexual Binding of Women*, a text by Walker and Parmar is an accompaniment to the documentary produced under the same title. Since this text was also produced in part by Alice Walker it seemed an important commentary on the plight of her fictional character Tashi who underwent this procedure. Walker mentions *Possessing the Secret of Joy* as evidence of her “current preoccupation.” Indeed within this text she reveals many of her thoughts on this practice such as:

...in the ‘enlightened’ West, it is as if genital mutilation has been spread over the entire , as women (primarily) rush to change their breasts, their noses, their weight and shape- i.e., by removal of ribs and fat, and by such things as deliberate starvation. I would want this in the film somehow, because otherwise there will be a tendency for Westerners to assume that genital mutilation is more foolish and ‘barbaric’ than the stuff they do. (10)

In this introductory moment Walker reveals that her concern is for women as a whole and hints that the goal is for Westerners to identify with the women in her proposed documentary on Africa. She seems to be hopeful throughout the text that this identification would lead to overall change and since this book was written in 1991 there have been great strides in reducing and eliminating the practice. This is in contrast the “‘enlightened’ West” where numbers continue to grow in the field of cosmetic surgery. This longing for women to identify with one another harkens back to Mohanty as well. Walker is quick to point out that Westerners should not feel superior but, instead, should find some common ground in the area of rights for the women who within all cultures

still feel that they are not enough. Walker suggests that modification of the body in any way is an idea perpetuated by a patriarchal society that insists women be pleasing.

Stanlie James offers a perspective of challenge to these ideas presented by Walker. James suggests that Walker is at risk of othering the women portrayed in *Warrior Marks* arguing that Walker comes across as one who "...must rescue those unfortunate women from themselves" (1033). In addition James provides a perspective of female genital mutilation as a cultural practice that should be eradicated but without alienating entire cultures of people in the process. James recognizes the value of this practice to the people who continue to engage in it noting that it would not continue to occur if the people did not see a significant benefit. James also notes that the practice of circumcision happens to boys as well though it is not used as a means of controlling sexuality. The overarching theme of this piece is whether or not people who are living outside the culture can speak about these practices without seeming to be arrogant or condescending. James lands in a spot where it is possible for outsiders to engage in the conversation if they come to the table with an open mind understanding that they do not even understand all of the nuances in their own culture much less those of another. While this argument does not completely discredit the ideas of Walker, she is an outsider when speaking about African culture since she was raised in America. She is very similar to the character of Nettie who enters Africa as a missionary from America and admits to feeling the part of an outsider. Both James and Walker have the advantage of entering the conversation as women of color but neither can offer the perspective of an African woman living in a culture where female genital mutilation is common practice. As such, neither woman can offer information on the practice as it applies to them but they can

both enter the conversation as Mohanty would suggest- women looking out for the rights of other women. As can be noted from this conflict of opinion, even within the conversation of feminism as it applies to all women there is a differing opinion on how the same goals should be achieved. What is valuable from this interaction is that there was a space available for this conversation to occur.

Joyce Russell-Robinson offers a similar challenge to James for Walker in her article "African Female Circumcision and the Missionary Mentality." Russell-Robinson lumps Alice Walker together with former Congresswoman Pat Schroeder saying that they are both "...putting herself into other people's business, specifically the business of female circumcision in African communities" (54). She notes that Walker underemphasizes the fact that female genital mutilation is not sexual in nature as is assumed by Western culture since this was a treatment in previous years for what doctors deemed sexual deviance. Robinson also points out that through Walker's documentary and her own interviews with Africans she has learned that the African people are capable of making intelligent decisions. She closes by offering the argument:

The ongoing interest in female circumcision clearly echoes a missionary mentality in the worse sense of the term. The voices of the missionaries seem to be saying once more, 'Let's rescue those Africans. They are backward.' If Alice Walker, Congresswoman Pat Schroeder and other critics of African female circumcision insist on saving Africans, then so be it. Let them do so. But instead of harping on the ritual of female circumcision, let them save Africans from malnutrition, lack of clean drinking water and infant mortality. (57)

Though this indictment of Walker's intention is scathing to say the least it is on point for understanding the imperialist attitudes displayed in the fictional works. However, regarding Walker's actual work with the perceived victims of genital mutilation both Robinson and James are speaking for women living in a culture they are not a part of. While at first glance it would seem to be a defense, they are actually putting themselves in the same boat as Walker by displaying the intention to "rescue those Africans."

Geraldine Brooks, *Nine Parts of Desire: The Hidden World of Islamic Women*, is an indictment of the treatment of women within the realm of Islam but does not shy away from pointing out the failings of the world community to intervene. Toward the end of this book Brooks begins a summation, "As Westerners, we profess to believe that human rights are an immutable international currency, independent of cultural mores and political circumstances" and she continues:

Is it even our fight? As a mental test, I always try to reverse the gender. If some ninety million little boys were having their penises amputated, would the world have acted to prevent it by now? You bet. (237)

This work, again, is a mid-90s text and much has (thankfully) changed since this publication. However, during the time of the fictional accounts that are the focus of this thesis these practices were still occurring without any repercussion. Brooks points out that "Early attempts to ban genital mutilation by colonial-government fiat were dismal failures" (237). Those failures were measured by colonial standards however. The purpose of this text is to consider whether it is "failure" to allow another culture to find its own way. Walker would argue that it is where women's rights are concerned. This

may especially hold true were the rights of young girls are in jeopardy as portrayed by Brooks. According to James and Robinson, empowering the women living in the culture rather than coming into a culture with an attitude that one knows better is more impactful. This attitude is the same one carried by imperialists and missionaries during the time period portrayed in *The Color Purple* and *Possessing the Secret of Joy*.

## **Literature Review: Historical Significance**

Following the fiction, theory, and non-fiction works on female genital mutilation the sources delve into the history of Western missionaries and their impact on African culture. In a collection of essays cultivated by Augustine S.O. Okwu titled *Igbo Culture and the Christian Missions: 1857-1957* the act of conversion is discussed. Okwu includes a detailed history of the Igbo people and their land. He describes the details and accounts of people as they had their culture gradually disassembled. The disassembly of the practice of polygamy followed by the introduction of social services for women shows the dichotomy presented to the African people. Had the missionaries and Westerners in general brought only negative experience the African people would have most likely ran them out of the land but they were also meeting needs of some of the most vulnerable in the society. Essentially Okwu points out the capitalization of Westerners were African society had previously struggled. Some of these areas include healthcare, social services, and the promise of improved economy.

This is backed up by the text *Social Pressures Behind Female Genital Mutilation* by Osman Chilala:

In every society in which it is practiced, female genital mutilation is a manifestation of gender inequality that is deeply entrenched in social, economic, and political structures. Like the now abandoned foot-binding in China and the practice of dowry and child marriage, female genital mutilation represents society's control over women. Such practices have the effect of perpetuating normative gender roles that are unequal and harm women. (12)

This passage continues saying, “Where female genital mutilation is widely practiced, it is supported by both men and women, usually without question, and anyone departing from the norm may face condemnation, harassment, and ostracism.” When women are ostracized by their own culture and made to feel and behave as outcasts they become easy targets for western missionaries. Though there are benefits to becoming westernized the women often, as exemplified by Tashi, eventually feel a sense of loss having rejected their own culture. It is this loss that proves the difficulty of being a woman in this situation. Either choice made will result in some type of negative repercussion which jeopardizes the amount of free-will and agency that is truly available regardless of the rhetoric from either side. Embracing the West means losing people who have been important throughout your life, while rejecting the West means losing an opportunity to make life better, if not for yourself, then for your offspring. Missionaries have the added dimension of threatening people with an everlasting damnation should their message be rejected. The promise of an eternal paradise would seem appealing to women with so few options.

*The Igbo Intellectual Tradition: Creative Conflict in African and African*

*Diasporic Thought* is a collection of essays on the various aspects of Igbo culture. For the purposes of this study only a few of the essays were chosen. Chapter nine titled, “Chinua Achebe and the Development of Igbo/African Studies” and written by Raphael Njoku, expounds upon the ideas introduced by Okwu saying:

Yet, despite the initial resistance and suspicions, the Christian religion quickly gained its first converts among the orphans, outcasts and other marginalized members of the Igbo

society. This outcome of events reminds us that in any society (whether traditional or modern) where individuals or groups are marginalized, the tendency is high for enemies from outside to recruit local collaborators among the aggrieved within. (251)

He goes on to explain, “ With Christianity serving as an instrument of destabilization, the titles of Achebe’s works conjure a vivid picture of the disintegrative impact the alien religion brought on the social fabric that held together the African social order” (255).

Unfortunately, while the sentiments above are most certainly true, it is more difficult to pin down how this invasion affected women since they are often “marginalized members” of any society. It does appear that women often benefit when the West enters because they do receive social services and healthcare that were previously unavailable. However, it can be argued that there is a cultural loss as well but only the women living this experience can speak to whether the loss or gain is greater.

In his article "The Church and the 1929 Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) contestation in Kenya, with special reference to the Scottish Presbyterian Church and the Kikuyu community” Stephen Joshua details the 1920s struggle between Western missionaries and the various African people’s right to religious freedom. Joshua discusses the imperialist attitude that simply could not accept cultural practices that were not previously known. He details the struggle that African physicians faced when bringing the practice to the attention of those at the World Health Organization due to the belief that anyone that hadn’t been circumcised remained an immature child. Since the mid-century revelation that female genital mutilation was occurring as a normal practice the West has been increasingly critical. This attitude began with John William Arthur who

was a missionary in 1929 Kenya. Arthur had previously championed the causes of the people within his mission rallying for equal treatment in agriculture and for education to be given to all including young girls. However, being a medical missionary, when Arthur learned of the practice of female genital mutilation he quickly became a vocal opponent and, "...sought to strengthen the mission's resistance to the practice of FGM" (4). He did this by linking education to the practice and denying education to the "cut people." This alienation by a former hero laid the groundwork for a struggle that would last decades. In addition this type of punishment only had an effect on the women of the mission. So, in his struggle for equality, Arthur unwittingly ended up punishing women by denying an education to those who, he believed, had already been damaged by an unnecessary religious practice. As is apparent, this exclusion from vital services provided by the mission alienated the people living within it which defeated the purpose of the missionaries being there to begin with. In addition this belittling of the culture and attempted ban only served to create a gap between two cultures that could not be reconciled because of the lack of mutual respect. This is the point in real life where tension was rife as the West began to assert dominance.

Gloria Chuku and Christine Ohale shed light on the plight of women during this time in their essays within the work *The Igbo Intellectual Tradition*. Chuku's essay, "Nwanyibuife Flora Nwapa, Igbo Culture and Women's Studies," illustrates the fact that Nwapa had been influenced by the strong women in her life but lived in a culture where many parents were still devaluing their own daughters by not affording them an opportunity to be educated instead favoring sons. Nwapa's parents believed in "Nwanyibuife" which means "a woman is something" and so she and her sisters were

educated. Nwapa went on to write several novels portraying women as smart and strong. According to Chuku this was a change from African Male authors (including Achebe) who, "...in their earlier fictional writings presented images of one-dimensional, subordinate and voiceless African women as appendages to the men," while, "Nwapa gave women a voice" (271).

Similarly, Christine Ohale describes Helen Chukwuma in her essay, "Helen Chukwuma and African Women's Empowerment." Ohale writes, "Chukwuma's intellectualism and humility coexisting in total accord has debunked societal insinuation that the educated female is pompous and unmarriageable. She contends that the vilification and stigmatization of educated and successful women are hurtful to society and that women's position in society shall continue to be the yardstick with which its social progress is measured. She maintains that: "Womanhood is nationhood, because if the woman develops, the family develops, and with the family so does the nation because the family is the nucleus of society. Women's empowerment therefore is family empowerment" (298). The attitudes of Nwapa and Chukwuma as described by Chuku and Ohale discredit the idea of John William Arthur which, as mentioned above, suggested removing the privilege of education as a punishment for having been circumcised. Since women were already existing on the borders of society at this time it did not benefit society as a whole to deprive women further of opportunity due to a societal practice that had been in place for decades. If this idea was in effort to stop the practice it may have been more effective to conversion overall had compassion been the tool rather than exclusion. However, the missionaries were still able to offer additional

benefits to women in the form of medical care and social services that did still lead to conversion, though one could argue that this was a result of exploitation.

In her book, *Prisoners of Ritual: An Odyssey into Female Genital Circumcision in Africa*, Hanny Lightfoot-Klein speaks with women and men residing in cultures where female genital mutilation exists. While the book has more information aside from the first-hand accounts, the interviews are valuable in providing an insider's perspective on the practice. The women interviewed seem to state the same objective time and time again, they want their daughters to have a better future with more options than were provided to them. For most, this means either no circumcision at all or a modified version of it that is less severe. In this way it could be stated that the missionaries were successful in their campaign. However, since the people were being interviewed by a Western woman it could be that the answers given did not express their true feelings but rather were a mimicry, or camouflage, developed over time to deal with these types of inquiries.

Chibueze Udeani gives an account of the inculturation of the Igbo people. He describes their history and traditions in great detail before entering this conversation and what is most interesting about his writing is the breakdown of the dialogue. He really focuses on the rhetoric used by the church for inculturation and conversion. For example he discusses the difference between "The Christian Message" and "The Message of Christ." The Message of Christ according to Udeani is the actual salvation message brought by Jesus Christ while "The Christian Message is, "the result of the encounter between the 'Message of Christ' and the respective culture it met before being introduced into Africa" (149). By explaining this difference Udeani highlights the belief by the west

that their encounter with Christ is unique and suggests that they believe the African cultures could not learn about Christ otherwise. In addition, this suggests that Africans need or want Christ. While this borders on a theological debate it is noteworthy that there is some inherent arrogance in the Western supposition that prior religious systems of African nations should essentially be ignored by people who had been accustomed to these beliefs for centuries. Just as with the ending of circumcision it may have been more prudent to introduce the idea and let it evolve within the society without forcing the issue. This could have been accomplished by introducing the Bible as a text and allowing Christianity to evolve within African culture as it did in European culture. However, attempting conversion in this manner would have meant giving up control of the culture and, therefore, of the land and people. This fear of losing control reveals the link between mission work and the goals of imperialists during this time. Missionaries were not solely there to convert people to Christ but also to gain trust and establish control through the provided services so that the transition to British, French, or American governance would not be perceived as a monumental change. This attempt only further reveals how little respect the West in general had for the people of Africa as well as their intellectual capacity.

Just as Udeani discusses the inculturation of the Igbo people, Nkeonye takes a journey through what Igbo justice looked like prior to imperialism. *Justice in Igbo Culture* is a very practical guide to the Igbo justice system. It discusses the structure, customs, and operations of this system making note of how things have changed since colonialism has taken place. For example, prior to colonialism or westernization, the tribe elders would come together to determine the punishment for both criminal and civil

cases. However, presently they are only allowed to consider civil cases as criminal cases are handled by the new imperialist governments. It is worth noting as part of this discussion that in the Igbo justice system women cannot be on the council. “The Council, chaired by the *obi*, is composed of all adult males who have taken the *okpala* title, elders who are neither title holders nor chiefs, and all other adult males. Apart from the *omu* who is a member by virtue of her position, women are excluded” (16). So, basically, any male outranks any female (aside from the *omu*) any day of the week in Igbo justice. However, when reading about this council more closely through Nkeonye’s work, it becomes clear that the council and the *obi* work as guides or leaders for the community rather than heavy-handed or all-powerful judges or kings. In this way women are allowed a voice since the council works as a sounding board for the community where all citizens have a voice. Women are allowed to attend these meetings and express their opinions about the issues facing the tribe. Considering this fact one can then look at the imperialist takeover of this system to see that the agency of women has been damaged. Once again, while women may not have been in the most powerful of positions, they were allowed a voice. When westerners took over the criminal law committed within this culture and removed the people from the justice system it became impossible for all citizens to have a voice much less women. The patriarchal colonialism that replaced the standard Igbo council acted in a much more unilateral way not considering that the people would like to have an impact on the members of their own community by discussing the act committed and the deserved punishment. While men ultimately lost in this arrangement as well, women were completely cut out and left at the mercy of the imperialist courts as fates were decided for family members and themselves. This type of justice is clear in

*Possessing the Secret of Joy* as Tashi stands trial and is sentenced for her crimes. While Tashi is not specifically Igbo the justice she faces is not traditional and is not carried out by the tribe that either she or M'lisa were a part of.

## Introduction to Argument

This thesis will be separated into two parts so as to spend an appropriate amount of time considering the agency of the women in each of these texts, *The Color Purple*, *Possessing the Secret of Joy* and *Things Fall Apart*, respectively. It should be noted that *Things Fall Apart* is more a point of reference for comparison than a text that is being examined as the Walker texts. It is an important reference point because Chinua Achebe hails from Africa but could also be considered limited on the experience of a female due to his own gender whereas Alice Walker has the female experience but could be considered limited on the African perspective as she hails from the American South. Though neither fictional text should be considered solely based on the origin of the author there are ideas presented in each work that are critical of non-fiction events such as the Western missionaries invasion of Africa and subsequent conversional tactics. Since these real life occurrences are essential to the plot of these fictional works it is only natural to consider the historical significance and how these events may have shaped the ideas of the authors behind these novels. This harkens to the ideas of Roland Barthes concerning authors as a product of society. While he would object to considering the author as influential on the work his theories suggest a consideration of the society that produced authors and the social concerns of said society. Derrida would argue that the ideas contained within the novels are not a product of the authors themselves but rather of the society that produced the authors as well. This could certainly be true as both authors experienced different kinds of oppression due to their own experiences within differing societies.

### ***Part I: Christian Missionaries and Female Agency***

The first part of this work will consider the impact of Western missionaries on female agency in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, *The Color Purple*, and *Things Fall Apart*. The first two novels are in contrast to the last. A positive impact on female agency is shown by the male African author, Chinua Achebe, while the negative impact on agency is shown by a female American author, Alice Walker. As mentioned above both of these authors are bi-products of the society in which they were living which resulted in experiences that were dissimilar. This examination of female agency will take place utilizing the theories of Homi Bhabha concerning mimicry, ambivalence, hybridity, cultural difference, and Third Space.

The first introduction to Tashi takes place in *The Color Purple*. She is just a girl when Nettie meets her in Africa when she arrives as a missionary. Tashi is part of the Olinka tribe where Nettie has been assigned. Tashi is the same age as the children of the missionary couple that Nettie is traveling with and the children become fast friends. Nettie describes to Celie, her sister in America, throughout the novel that Tashi struggles with wanting to be like Adam and Olivia, the missionary children, and holding to her own African tradition. A lot of this struggle comes from Tashi's feelings about her own mother. She has trouble separating her own desires from what she believes her mother wants for her. This is where the duality described by Bhabha enters. Tashi begins to mimic while holding on to her own culture. This leads to an experience of ambivalence where Tashi is a walking opposition. She struggles with becoming a creature that cannot exist in either place. Just as described by Bhabha as a cultural phenomenon, Tashi is unable to recognize herself as original and sees herself as a repetition of two cultures that

have clashed inside her. This collision leads Tashi to feel that she must make a choice, especially when the political landscape around her changes and the West begins to become more and more dominant. As this occurs Tashi chooses to remain loyal to her heritage and engages in FGM but later in the fictional account Tashi rejects this culture in favor of the West by marrying Adam and relocating to America leaving all she knows behind. *The Color Purple* ends in a way that makes the reader believe that Tashi has found her place. However, *Possessing the Secret of Joy* reveals that this is not the case as Tashi continues to struggle with who she is and where she fits in.

With the missionaries present this is a struggle that many of the tribe members face as they want to be accepted by the missionaries but also feel a sense of duty and honor regarding their own traditions. This struggle is more pronounced for Tashi as she becomes best friends with Olivia and eventually falls in love with Adam. This development of relationships happens at the same time that the Western powers are buying up African land for industrial development. There is a literal collision of these two cultures as the paved road, commissioned by Western governments and sanctioned by greedy African leaders, plows through the fields that provide sacred sustainability to the Olinkas. This collision leads Tashi to feel that she must declare an allegiance or take a side. Though she loves Adam she remembers the traditions of her people and she recalls the suffering and death of her elder sister as a child. This pushes Tashi to join a rebel faction and visit the same woman who killed her sister to have female circumcision surgery. She also has traditional lacerations on her face in patterns to distinguish her as Olinka. When she does eventually return to Adam and Olivia, Tashi and Adam marry and he takes the same facial marks to show solidarity with his new wife.

As mentioned above *Possessing the Secret of Joy* continues the story of Tashi who is the focus of the novel. In this novel it is revealed that Tashi is still struggling with her identity as an African citizen in America which is primarily due to her choice to be circumcised. She is no longer able to have pleasurable intercourse with her husband due to the pain caused by her unsexing. This leads to Adam having an affair with a Frenchwoman. To show a further dichotomy, Adam and Tashi have a son named Benny who suffers brain damage at birth due to Tashi's former circumcision. Benny is stuck in the birth canal which results in a lack of oxygen and Tashi consequently blames herself for this. Though Adam never says he blames her there is an obvious resentment of this choice as it has ruined their lives together and even the health of their son. Adam and the Frenchwoman also have a son who is described as an intellectual. Tashi is aware of the Frenchwoman and her son and resents them feverishly for having the part of Adam that she lost in Africa. Lisette, the Frenchwoman, in contrast worries about Tashi as Adam tells of her decline into madness.

These two women represent the struggle within the novel for Adam. Adam came to Africa when he was just a child. Though he was raised among the Olinka tribe he was raised by Western missionaries, which created a hybridity within him as well. Tashi is the woman he has loved from a very young age but she was damaged herself and, to Adam, this has damaged their relationship as well. Though he modifies his own body in an effort to remain close to Tashi the gulf between them grows over time and is only solidified by the birth of Benny. Lisette is a woman he has grown to love. She fills the void that Tashi has left. She provides Adam with a healthy son and worries over his wife who is mentally ill. It is not a big leap to see that Adam, like Tashi, is a vulnerable member of society that

has been poached by the figurative West- Lisette. In this way both Adam and Tashi become victims of their life experience where it has been impressed upon them that the Western ways are the best. This is further solidified in Adam's mind through Pierre who is a product of the French culture, who grows to be a strong intellectual figure but also the rock that holds his family together, even winning the trust of Tashi. Pierre, in his own way, is the figurative missionary that is able to bind both cultures without asserting dominance. He reaches out to Tashi time and time again even enduring physical abuse and eventually wins her over with his love and devotion to her son Benny. This is akin to the provision of social services by the missionaries from Western cultures as a means of bribery. However, Pierre is truly altruistic in that he is not using Benny to get close to Tashi. He truly has an interest in the well-being of his half-brother and his half-brother's mother. To further distinguish these Lisette and Tashi as opposite forces in Adam's life Lisette dies a natural death while Tashi dies by firing squad for the murder of M'lisa, just as she has lived unnaturally, both due to her interactions with M'lisa.

M'lisa is responsible for the circumcision of Tashi and the death of Tashi's sister. When Tashi finally begins to reclaim her own identity she goes to M'lisa and ends up killing her after spending several days as her nurse. While this is freeing for Tashi in a way she does end up physically restrained when she goes to prison. The jury decides against Tashi and she is sentenced to death by firing squad. Prior to her death Tashi makes peace with all of the people in her life, including herself. Pierre becomes a solid part of her inner circle by forming a solid relationship with Benny and helping Tashi to see her own value.

Viewing this set of events through the lens of Homi Bhabha, mimicry is the first concept of consideration. For Tashi, mimicry leads to a confusion and reversion that ultimately harms her in the most brutal of ways. Tashi begins mimicking the behaviors of her Western counterparts Adam and Olivia. She likes the Western ideas and longs to be with Adam. In an outright rejection of Olinka tradition, Tashi has intercourse with Adam in the fields where the roofleaf grows. This field is sacred and defiling it in this manner is said to lead to certain destruction. Later on when the white, Western road builders destroy the roofleaf field for the construction of the road Tashi's previous indiscretions with Adam in that field lead her to believe that she has contributed to the destruction of her own people and, therefore, that she must pay penance. Thus her mimicry of the Western counterparts and ideals leads to a reversion to the very foundation of her African experience. This result that leads to the question of whether or not the missionaries impact was positive concerning female agency as Tashi felt that she had no agency as an outsider and that her agency within her own culture was compromised. As a result of this lack of agency, contributed to by the missionaries, Tashi ends up at the extreme opposite end of the spectrum from Western culture. She rejects it entirely as she feels it has rejected her and she stops the mimicry to engage in reversion by undergoing a circumcision at an adult age rather than at the ceremonial age of eleven. This results in an even more painful recovery than was typical and, in addition, Tashi had already experienced intercourse and orgasm with Adam, which made this loss even more painful as, unlike an eleven year old, Tashi knew what she was giving up. She understood that she was losing her sexuality. However, it could be argued that she did not recognize the extent to which this would impact her future life. This is a result of having been raised in

a patriarchal society where the only sexual purpose of a woman was to please a man. Likewise, when Tashi became close with the family of missionaries the message was much the same from a Christian perspective with pressure being placed on the women of the village to stop circumcision to meet the Western patriarchal ideal of beauty. Had Tashi been allowed to experience her own sexuality without shame she may have had the forethought to consider the future implications of her choice to undergo FGM. However, being pressured by two competing societies with both devaluing her experience as a woman caused Tashi to enter the process of reversion to the more dominant culture in her life.

Mimicry as portrayed in *Things Fall Apart* leads to positive effects such as equality and the rule of law that impact women in a very positive way. In the first chapter of the novel Achebe introduces the reader to Okonkwo who is a domineering man with several wives and children who cower in fear of this abusive warrior. Okonkwo takes pride in this and when the missionaries arrive with their Western ideas and softer ways Okonkwo's way of being is threatened. Though he tries to overcome Okonkwo cannot compete with the allure of conversion. In this case the overall decision of Okonkwo's people to accept the ways of the missionaries as a rejection of continued bloodshed between tribes shakes his way of life to the core and leads him to self-destruct. The result of this chain of events is that Okonkwo's wives and children are released from his stranglehold and are free to pursue lives of freedom. Though the wives do not reject all of the traditions of their culture the missionaries impact on their society as a whole leads to an increased availability of agency through the power vacuum that is left when the men

are unseated as all powerful. In this case mimicry does lead to a positive result for the women involved though the men are left at a disadvantage.

Though in the instance of Tashi mimicry of the colonizers led to reversion and undesirable results both Tashi and the women of *Things Fall Apart* show the idea postulated by Bhabha that “the observer becomes the observed and ‘partial’ representation rearticulates the whole notion of identity and alienates it from essence” (127). Tashi separates herself from the colonizers by distinguishing herself through African tradition and then maintains her own culture in addition to portions of the colonizer/western culture creating a partial representation of either culture that alienates either from the essence of itself. Likewise the women of *Things Fall Apart* accept only the parts of Western culture that benefit their independence and agency while rejecting parts of their heritage that limit them. Creating a patchwork culture to create a sense of agency is a Third Space where women can dictate more about their own existence than previously had been allowed.

Existing in a Third Space is Shug Avery who is the freest woman in the novel *The Color Purple* even in comparison to white women of that day. She creates her own agency by rejecting expectations of all facets of culture and creating her own rules. Thus Shug Avery is not beholden to the idea of mimicry in that she creates her own subculture by rejecting all cultures presented to her. As an American, Avery is not beholden to the ideas of the West, neither does she have any represented African culture to contend with. In fact, very little information is given on Shug Avery’s history as it is made clear that she is a self-made woman in every meaning of the phrase. Shug uses this power to try and

pull the women around her up and to make it clear to the men in her circle that she will not be dominated. Tuzyline Allan points out in *Feminist Nightmares : Women at Odds: Feminism and the Problem of Sisterhood* the argument that Shug is still captive saying, “Shug is trapped within a tantalizing male sexual economy that thrives on victimization rather than emotional fulfillment” (96). However, Celie is able to gain her own agency through Shug’s influence while several of the men are able to recognize the capability of women to choose their own fate. This indicates that even if Shug is trapped in a male economy she uses it to the advantage of those around her. While it could be argued that Tashi chose her own fate by electing to have circumcision performed this would lack consideration for the fact that Tashi made this decision under the pressure of a patriarchal society that deemed this act one of loyalty and tradition:

After two days it became clear that Tashi was deliberately hiding. Her friends said while we were away she’d undergone both the facial scarification ceremony and the rite of female initiation...

It was not until Sunday that we saw Tashi. She’d lost a considerable amount of weight, and seemed listless, dull-eyed and tired. Her face was still swollen from half a dozen small, neat incisions high on each cheek...

Tashi is, unfortunately, ashamed of these scars on her face, and now hardly ever raises her head. They must be painful too because they look irritated and red. But this is what the villagers are doing to the young women and even the men. Carving their identification as a people into their children’s faces. But the children think of the

scarification as backward, something from their grandparents' generation, and often resist. (241-242)

As Tashi and the women of *Things Fall Apart* engage in mimicry they often dabble in hybridity. However, Olivia is a living example of hybridity. She is raised with the Western ideals of her parents but in an African culture. Her impact on Tashi cannot be ignored as Tashi ultimately rejects Olivia and Adam's ideals in favor of her own. So even though Olivia is a study in hybridity, Tashi rejects her ideals in favor of cultural purity. As Bhabha states, "It is not that the voice of authority is at a loss for words. It is, rather, that the colonial discourse has reached that point when, faced with the hybridity of its objects, the presence of power is revealed as something other than what its rules of recognition assert" (Bhabha 160). Olivia as a hybridity of colonial discourse reveals to Tashi that her culture has been devalued and that Olivia is still predominantly Western. Her allegiances lie with the West while Tashi's allegiances lie with her own African culture. This revelation results in Tashi's overall rejection of hybridity in her own life. Though she is drawn to Western culture she is innately African and rejects the power that is revealed to be "other than what its rules of recognition assert." While the missionaries have been living with the Olinka tribe and preaching goodwill and sanctification to them the white men come in and destroy sacred parts of Olinka culture thus revealing that the missionaries power is limited by the empires from which they were born and further revealing the religion and conversion experience is lip service whereas actual Western cultures come in as dominant ignoring all other traditions and heritage in favor of traditional colonial imperialism. Whereas the missionaries told the people of love and redemption the practice of imperialism proves the true agenda to be conversion not only

to a different religion but to a different way of life entirely. This revelation of connecting between religion and imperialism leaves the Olinka's with a sense of betrayal.

Bhabha asserts that, "If the effect of colonial power is seen to be the production of hybridization rather than the noisy command of colonialist authority or the silent repression of native traditions, then an important change of perspective occurs" (Bhabha 160). He goes on to assert that this results in a questioning of the authority as takes place in *The Color Purple*. Tashi joins a rebel group that is causing chaos for the colonizers in order to reject the imperialism and assert their own heritage. The rebel group is made up of people from various African tribes who have begun to recognize and question the dismissal of their own ideas and even physical ownership of their land.

In addition religious hybridity is evident in the mixing of cultures in all three novels, *The Color Purple*, *Secret of Possessing Joy* and *Things Fall Apart*. This hybridity is not one culture rejecting their own beliefs entirely as Western missionaries would hope. Instead this is the idea of adopting portions of Christianity into an already established belief system. Tashi, while drawn to the Western cultures that were embodied in her friends Adam and Olivia, is only able to adopt parts of the Christian religion she is encouraged to convert to. Gloria Anzaldua discusses this phenomenon in her book, *Borderlands La Frontera: The New Mestiza*:

Alienated from her mother culture, 'alien' in the dominant culture, the woman of color does not feel safe within the inner life of her Self. Petrified, she can't respond, her face caught between *los intersticios*, the spaces between the different worlds she inhabits.

The ability to respond is what is meant by responsibility, yet our cultures take away our ability to act—shackle us in the name of protection. Blocked, immobilized, we can't move forward, can't move backwards. That writhing serpent movement, the very movement of life, swifter than lightning, frozen.

We do not engage fully. We do not make full use of our faculties. We abnegate. And there in front of us is the crossroads and choice: to feel a victim where someone else is in control and therefore responsible and to blame (being a victim and transferring the blame on culture, mother, father, ex-lover, friend, absolves me of responsibility), or to feel strong, and for the most part, in control. (42-43)

Tashi ends up engaging in FGM as a rejection of Christian ideals believing that this act will prove to the world that she is African. The eventuality of this decision is that Tashi becomes an African woman living in the West desperately trying to claim her identity, and (in so doing) she returns to Africa and murders the woman who helped her in the attempt at establishing herself as a pure African rather than a walking hybridity. Tashi cannot embrace the notion that she can be both and instead must reject one for the other eventually trusting her Western counterparts to guide her to wholeness prior to her death. This outcome can be explained through Bhabha's observation that:

Hybridity is the revaluation of the assumption of colonial identity through the repetition of discriminatory identity effects. It displays the necessary deformation and displacement of all sites of discrimination and domination. It unsettles the mimetic or narcissistic demands of colonial power but re-implicates its identifications in strategies of subversion that turn the gaze of the discriminated back upon the eye of power. (Bhabha 160)

In Tashi's death she is able to accomplish peace but her struggle and the crime she is convicted of is in direct correlation to the imperialism she experienced. Since this is the case she is able to "turn the gaze back upon the eye of power" in her execution as she is being put to death for killing a woman who mutilated her while she was experiencing the effects of imperialism.

After hybridity and mimicry have been considered in the context of the novels a consideration of ambivalence as described by Bhabha is eminent. He states that:

The colonial presence is always ambivalent, split between its appearance as original and authoritative and its articulation as repetition and difference. It is a disjunction produced within the act of enunciation as a specifically colonial articulation of those two disproportionate sites of colonial discourse and power: the colonial scene as the invention of history, mastery, mimesis or as the 'other scene' of *Entstellung*, displacement, fantasy, psychic defence, and an 'open' textuality. Such a display of difference produces a mode of authority that is agnostic (rather than antagonistic). Its discriminatory effects are visible in those split subjects of the racist stereotype- the simian Negro, the effeminate Asiatic male- which ambivalently fix identity as the fantasy of difference.

(Bhabha 153)

This kind of ambivalence is displayed in *The Color Purple* as stereotypes about the people of Africa are revealed through the eyes of Nettie who represents a lesser version of colonial power due to her lack of power in her own society. Nettie discusses the appearance of the black people in Africa and describes their traditions and thoughts to Celie. Though she is kind and does not disparage the people it does always seem as if she

is hinting that her own ideas are superior which confirms Bhabha's point above that there is a racist stereotype. Upon her arrival in Africa, Nettie writes, "Miss Beasley used to say it was a place overrun with savages who didn't wear clothes. Even Corrine and Samuel thought like this at times. But they know a lot more about it than Miss Beasley or any of our other teachers, and besides they spoke of all the good things they could do for the downtrodden people from whom they sprang. People who need Christ and good medical advice" (131). This attitude does "fix" the idea of difference in Nettie's mind, which, as evidenced in the passage, has already taken root with Samuel and Corrine. Even though Nettie would be treated the same in America as her African counterpart, she is quick to note the differences between them without regard for the African culture as one that is as valid as her own. This proves Bhabha's point that, "...the representation of colonial authority depends less on a universal symbol of English identity than on its productivity as a sign of difference" (Bhabha 154). Nettie is making an effort to ground her colonial authority in differences while writing to her sister who is being oppressed in America. However, this irony does not appear to ever become clear to Nettie.

However, even without Nettie having an epiphany the two cultures begin to clash over the differences that she is so keen to hang on to. Cultural Difference as described in Bhabha's *The Location of Culture*, is not the recognition of differences between culture resulting in diversity but rather the recognition of differences between cultures that leads to the majority of problems between those conflicting cultures in a struggle for dominance. This can be best exemplified in our own world by considering the struggle between Israelis and Palestinians. These cultures have not learned to live together in diversity but rather continue to struggle with their differences and the perceived struggle

for dominance of the geographical locations which hold religious significance for both groups. Bhabha discusses this kind of struggle saying, “When the Muslim is coerced into speaking a Christian truth he denies the logic of his senses; the Hindu denies the evidence of his eyes; the Bengalee denies his very name as he perjures himself. Or so we are told. Each time what comes to be textualized as the truth of the native culture is a part that becomes ambivalently incorporated in the archives of colonial knowledge....It is a form of persecutory paranoia that emerges from cultures’ own structured demand for imitation and identification” (Bhabha 197). Okonkwo from *Things Fall Apart* cannot deal with the Cultural Difference when he realizes that he cannot compete or dominate with the West. As a result he takes his own life rather than live in submission. Tashi recognizes this struggle for dominance and joins the rebel group to meet it head on believing that she can preserve her own culture not realizing that the colonials had already proved dominance and were now demanding “imitation” and “identification.” The eventual outcome of this domination in Africa results in a people that exist in the Third Space.

The Third Space as identified by Bhabha is a homogenous identity created by the interaction of two cultures as described by Okwu in his collection of essays titled *Igbo Culture and the Christian Missions 1857-1957*,

They were people whose indigenous culture had been compromised and had become overlaid by their education, by their parents’ slave experience, and by the fact they were born and raised in a culture and environment outside their ancestral cultural homestead. The culture that they had and that molded their life for the mission was the one that

dispossessed them of any vague natural connections they might have had with their ancestral culture. (Okwu 102)

Products of the Third Space in *Possessing the Secret of Joy* most notably include Benny and Pierre. Benny is the child of Tashi and Adam which makes him a physical representation of the Third Space in that he is homogenous by nature. In addition he is disconnected from Africa where both of his parents spent their formative years but is still shaped by their experiences there both literally and figuratively. Benny is literally damaged physically because of the traditions of his mother and is shaped mentally and emotionally by the religious and personal experiences of his Western father. Therefore Benny exists in a Third Space as neither African nor Western, neither part nor whole.

Pierre exists in the Third Space because comparatively his father Adam does not have the same Western experience as his French mother. Since he is raised primarily by his mother, Lisette, Pierre becomes an intellectual that is able to make a connection with Tashi where Adam failed. This is against all odds as Pierre is the product of a years-long affair had by Adam. However, Pierre, existing in the Third Space, is able to recognize Tashi's suffering and embrace it where Adam could not due to years of resentment. Adam shared things about Tashi with Pierre and Lisette and Tashi was the reason that Adam could not be a full time husband and father to their family. Lisette explained these trials to Pierre while Adam provided the history which led to a greater understanding and a close relationship with his brother Benny.

## **Part II: Woman as Commodity**

The second part of this thesis addresses the fact that both the represented African and Christian cultures used women as commodities to fulfill the needs of men. This revelation sheds light on the contradiction that is the West as missionaries tried to put forth the message of increased quality of life by offering women and their children healthcare, education, and social services while other Western men came into Africa and raped, impregnated, and otherwise abused women. This contradiction set the missionaries up to fail and often led to the above mentioned services being used almost as bribery for conversion. Sylvia Jacobs writes:

Branch initially noticed that many Africans were indifferent to alien religions but were eager to secure an education. It was for this reason that older missionary societies had established schools which attracted many young men. In these missionary schools, African students were exposed to Christianity and some accepted the new religion. Many Africans recognized a direct relationship between obtaining an education for the purpose of advancement within the colonial system and conversion to Christianity, and some were willing to convert as a means of securing that education. (218)

This bribery would not have been necessary for women had they felt an increased sense of control (agency) over their own destiny with the entrance of the West. While this is how the mission was sold to Africa as a whole, the ultimate product was a choice for women that left them in a constant limbo between two spaces without room for agency in either. As Christian culture moved into the continent of Africa and claimed superiority, if not by saying so then by replacing cultural practices of previous decades, women

continued to suffer the same lack of agency while being bribed with healthcare and education. Slavery and rape are not superior to genital mutilation as they are both forms of female abuse and control. While this is not an argument for the continuation of such a clearly barbaric practice, it is acknowledgement that there is still a disregard for female agency and, indeed, female sexuality within both cultures. Laurel Zwissler says that, Feminists of faith argue that religion itself is not the core cause of misogyny, but rather that male-dominated religious traditions reflect broader structural inequalities that oppress and denigrate women. It is naive to think that if everyone woke up tomorrow an atheist, no one would continue to be sexist, racist or homophobic. These negative values suffuse society and transcend particular cultural systems. Blaming religion for these problems means not having to acknowledge how deeply ingrained hierarchy and oppression are within contemporary societies. (363)

This assertion implies that Christianity was not the problem in Africa. The problem in Africa during the time of Walker's fictional accounts was the "male-dominated religious traditions" such as FGM in the native culture and the use of women in Nettie's native America as amusement for men.

Nettie came to Africa, in part, to get away from a culture where she was subject to being bartered by men for sex and labor. It is ironic then that she, as a missionary, cannot see the failings of the West. However, even if she did she would have little influence as a woman of color. Nettie also left behind an older sister, Celie, who was not lucky enough to get out of America and was therefore married off to a man to be his unwilling sexual partner, his housekeeper, his cook, and a nursemaid to his unruly children after their

mother died. He essentially held Celie hostage by refusing to let her have contact with Nettie due to Nettie's refusal of his advances and escape from his attempted rape. Celie was only allowed to have contact with the women who came into the home through the children or through her husband's extramarital affairs. This eventually leads to Celie's realization that she is a lesbian and her consummation with the aforementioned Shug Avery. Shug is there to sleep with Celie's husband but she sleeps with Celie as well which is the beginning of a year's long on again, off again affair between the two women. By the end of the novel they have rejected the expectations of society to move in together and be businesswomen who support themselves without the aid or approval of men. However, in doing this both Shug and Celie are rejecting the ideas of their own culture by creating a subculture. This was their only option if they hoped to achieve agency.

With this kind of culture existing in America where Nettie, Samuel and Corrine left it is difficult to imagine that they could go to Africa as missionaries and feel comfortable asserting that a culture such as the Olinkas should give up their own ancient customs in favor of the Western ideal. For the women in Tashi's tribe to try and mimic the Western missionaries in hopes of gaining similar power is a farce. It is not recognized by the Olinka that in the West these missionaries, Nettie and Samuel, are rejected by society on the basis of skin color alone. In addition they are unaware that women of color in America are often kept as slaves who are raped and traded amongst men. The women that they see as missionaries are only living freely and independently because they have removed themselves from the Western culture. By doing so they are operating under the narcissistic idea that they have something better with which to replace the established culture. This is not true as Tashi later recognizes. Though she loves Western culture she

recognizes that in her own culture she was mutilated physically and in the West she is mutilated mentally and emotionally by being perpetually rejected for her identity. Bhabha recognizes this crisis of identity saying, “The paranoid threat from the hybrid is finally uncontainable because it breaks down the symmetry and duality of self/other, inside/outside” (Bhabha 165). When Tashi realizes that she has no agency in either culture she, like Shug Avery, decides to create her own identity within the existing culture by exacting revenge and then embracing who she has become.

Regarding cultural difference as it exists, within the idea that both American and the fictional African cultures, are shown in these works to devalue women, “It is in the enunciatory act of splitting that the colonial signifier creates its strategies of differentiation that produce and undecidability between contraries or oppositions” (Bhabha 183). This undecidability is what drove Tashi mad and led Shug and Celie to reject traditional religious views in favor of their own belief systems therefore proving that the missionaries ideals were just that, ideals. When it came to providing alternative options for women the construct of power was challenged and then turned on its ear. With the true source of power being revealed as white colonizers with money and an interest in rubber farming the missionaries were revealed to have no agency themselves, which meant that they could provide none to the people they were leading and supporting.

## **Concluding Thoughts**

The impact of mimicry today is widespread as women and men across the globe are exposed to Western ideals of feminism through increased media access. Some cultures have embraced Western ideals whole-heartedly while others have engaged in a hybridity of ideas by adopting portions of Western culture and blending with their own culture. Still others have suffered the ill-effects of mimicry just as Tashi. In an effort to reject-Western cultures, they have become deeply suspicious and increasingly secretive.

Bhabha suggests that we begin to look at history as common to understand this point we have reached today. As society becomes increasingly homogenous:

It is significant that the productive capacities of this Third Space have a colonial or alien territory—where I have led you- may reveal that the theoretical recognition of the split-space of enunciation may open the way to conceptualizing an international culture, based not on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the diversity of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture's hybridity. To that end we should remember that it is the 'inter'- the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the in between space—that carries the burden of the meaning of culture. It makes it possible to begin envisaging national, anti-nationalist histories of 'the people'. And by exploring this Third Space, we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of ourselves. (Bhabha 56)

Bhabha's ideas suggest an emergence of culture that looks beyond the idea of "othering" where history is considered common and the Third Space is used as common ground

rather than an area where conflict takes place. While this notion seems idealistic it also seems more realistic as the world becomes increasingly the same.

Regarding the missionary John Arthur, Joshua says, “The continuing dilemma for contemporary Africans, and probably for the mistreated Sierra Leoneans in retrospect, is the ill-conceived connection between religious conversion, the *raison d’etat* for evangelization, and cultural transformation. The missionaries, it would seem from most of their activities, did not make any distinction between the two” (Okwu 103). So even as the world continues to become more homogenous through the continuing imperialization of the West, the connection between conversion and equality cannot do the same. It must not be required that a people give up their own religion and culture in order to enter the Third Space as a contender for leadership or, at the very least, respect. However, this obstacle will continue to be something to overcome until Westerners are able to recognize their own faults rather than attempting to fix the flaws they have identified in other various world cultures. As Walker points out, plastic surgery and FGM are really not that far removed from one another and both result from the patriarchal ideal.

However, Tashi was not able to recognize this as she was in the midst of two patriarchal ideals. Having studied the effects of this cultural merge on Tashi, she clearly had no good choice between the two. Her native culture was disappearing in the face of Western expansion. To adapt or perish comes to mind. In Tashi’s case, she did eventually perish as a result of having used FGM, to her own detriment, in an effort to cling to a dying culture. Tashi’s inability to embrace either culture fully left her in a perpetual limbo. This eventually ravished her mental well-being and led her to destroy M’lisa

whom she seemed to view as a representation of all that had gone wrong in her life. Tashi had become a prisoner of her mind and situation. All of her worst fears had come to fruition as revealed at the end of *The Color Purple*:

Adam announced his desire to marry Tashi.

Tashi announced her refusal to be married.

And then, in that honest, forthright way of hers, she gave her reasons. Paramount among them that, because of the scarification marks on her cheeks Americans would look down on her as a savage and shun her, and whatever children she and Adam might have. That she had seen the magazines we receive from home and that it was very clear to her that black people did not truly admire blackskinned black people like herself, and especially did not admire blackskinned black women. They bleach their faces, she said. They fry their hair. They try to look naked.

Also, she continued, I fear Adam will be distracted by one of these naked looking women and desert me. Then I would have no country, no people, no mother and no husband and brother. (279)

Indeed Adam was distracted by Lisette. Indeed Americans did not accept Tashi as her own people had done. Indeed Benny was looked down upon because of his deficits which resulted from the FGM. Indeed, Tashi found, Western cultures really did not have anything to offer to a woman who might have had a relatively normal life in her own culture and home. What Western society brought to Tashi was not of benefit. While Nettie, Samuel, Adam and Olivia became her family Tashi always remained a stranger in

a strange land among people who left her feeling alone even within a crowd. The western missionaries could not implore Tashi to save herself from FGM, neither could they save her from the anguish and rejection that proceeded. The disassembly of her culture only left Tashi searching for a way to fill this void as Western expansion could not replace the sense of community that once existed among the Olinka tribe.

In Tashi's case, however, it is not clear what the alternative outcome would have been. Had she not married Adam she would have been a circumcised woman in Africa with a quickly disappearing culture. She would have had to adapt to the expansion by obtaining education (often at the expense of conversion) or she would have had to marry a man from a similar culture to her own and try to eke out a living while fulfilling her obligations to him of bearing children and recovering each time from the tearing that would occur as a result of her FGM. Tashi was left with an impossible decision. She had to choose to let Adam take care of her in spite of her fears and in the process turn her back on her homeland or she had to remain loyal to her homeland and people and suffer the uncertainty of a future on very shaky ground. In either event, Tashi was aware that she would not be the ruler of her own destiny because of the lack of agency a black woman possessed in these times and cultures.

Tashi is microcosm that shows the true lack of superiority on the part of the West. Tashi was no better off by embracing Adam and moving to the United States than she would have been had her culture remained intact and not been disturbed. Samuel, Nettie, Adam, and Olivia had good intentions but ultimately shamed Tashi and the rest of the villagers out of their age old traditions and practices while providing services such as

education. At the surface level this would seem like a positive thing but this slow infiltration paved the way for Western expansion and the ultimate downfall of the culture as a whole. Tashi, as a microcosm, repeated the same cycle, slowly infiltrated by her love for Adam and the protection he could provide for her. Tashi found her inner self in chaos which led to her own destruction not unlike the destruction of her people and many real African nations that came after embracing the social services and “protection” provided by Western nations.

With this in mind, it almost seems too optimistic to buy into Bhabha’s idea of the exploration of the Third Space, where people exist with a common history that is anti-nationalist. Perhaps that is only because Walker’s characters are not yet far enough removed from these actions that brought pain and destruction on so many. Tashi and Walker as an author and activist are successful in showing that sometimes there are no good choices for women. However, one of the most important things that this study has proven is that the West is simply not familiar enough with any African culture to provide lasting benefits and often Western cultures do not enter the conversation with altruistic motives even where missionaries are concerned. The better alternative to approaching social change would be to take the advice of Stanlie James to encourage conversation among the people of the culture and respect the practices to avoid alienation. This approach might have saved Tashi from the reversion that led to her choice for FGM and ultimately destroyed her future. This approach might have even lead to the conversation suggested by Bhabha where differences can be laid aside, faults can be recognized, and a common heritage can be valued.

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