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பன்னாட்டுத் தமிழாய்வு மின்னிதழ்

(Peer Reviewed Journal Multidisciplinary)

ISSN: 2582-399X



காலாண்டு இதழ்
(ஐனவரி, ஏப்ரல், ஜூலை, அக்டோபர்)
ஆகிய மாதங்களில் வெளிவரும்

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ആന്തരികം

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL TRAUMA AND CULTURAL CONFLICT IN ALICE WALKER'S *POSSESSING THE SECRET OF JOY*

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ABSTRACT

Black women's struggles and racial prejudice are extensively discussed in Alice Walker's writings. Her writings center on African Americans' challenges, especially those of women, in the face of a violent, sexist, and racist culture. The place of women of color in history and culture is another theme in her writings. She is well-liked in the liberal political sphere because she upholds unpopular opinions out of moral conviction. She has compassion for individuals of all racial, ethnic, and sexual identities. Religion, culture, and tradition all have an excessive hold on society and human existence. Alice Walker's works go into great detail about racial prejudice and the hardships faced by Black women. Her essays focus on the difficulties African Americans confront in a violent, sexist, and racist society, particularly those faced by women. Another issue in her writings is the role of women of color in history and culture. Because she maintains controversial views out of moral conviction, she enjoys popularity in the liberal political arena. She is sympathetic to people of all racial, ethnic, and sexual identities. Tradition, culture, and religion all have an overwhelming influence on human existence and society. Some African-American women writers take the lead in bringing the reality behind the customs and emancipating these women by using their writing to help them understand their own worth and identity. They made it possible for African-American women to be freed. Alice Walker is another notable writer who is also a social activist. She speaks up in favor of the advancement and settlement of oppressed women. In this paper discussed the terrible practice of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) in Alice Walker's *Possessing the Secret of Joy*.

Keywords: Trauma, Marginalized, Identity, Subjugation and Oppression.

Introduction

In addition to freedom, power, and community, spiritual survival and individual identity are major themes in Alice Walker's books. Her background and ancestry offer a means of comprehending the contemporary society that her characters inhabit. She depicts black self-loathing and devastation in striking detail in her artwork. She feels that she needs to strive for a broad scope as a writer. "As an activist, writer, socialist and poet, Alice Walker filters many deep and dense issues in her various works, such as Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), face scarring and famine problems" (Hasanthi 42). The novel's protagonist experiences psychological suffering when she believes that new Western values and beliefs are destroying her sense of self. With time and life experiences, the novel's traumatized heroine learns that white people are not the criminals this time; rather, she finds that sexism and African tribalism

are to blame for her psychological tragedies. Her predicament involves renunciation the false pride and egoism of African tribalism.

The literary style and topic of African American writers in America are unique. Black author Alice Walker expresses her concern for the American black community. (Younis and Raja, 17) Black women's struggles are the main subject of Alice Walker's writing; particularly in her fifth book *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992), which emphasizes suffering and shattering, taboos. This book serves as a dual cultural reading practice. First, the acts in the book center on the custom of female circumcision. Second, the African protagonist, an African American woman, lives in a fictional universe. Female circumcision is a custom that involves operating and tightening a woman's vagina to make it more pleasurable for men.

The ancient practice of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) is depicted in the book *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. Under the pressure of patriarchy, the protagonists and other female characters in the text deal with issues of existence, trauma, and self-dignity when they are circumcised. Walker targets Black people with verbal and sexual assault. "As Black people battled for their rights against white supremacy during the Civil Rights Movement, Alice Walker depicts the greatest turmoil and disturbances created in America" (Pratibha 12). African-American authors' novels make it abundantly evident that black men have faced racism and classism, while black women have faced sexism, racism, classism, and language barriers both inside and outside the community. Women are also expected to adhere to all social norms and cultural obligations that have been created by men and performed since the beginning of time. They are obligated by culture to embrace all duties that are assigned to them based on their gender. In this state, women lose their sense of self.

The term 'tradition' has all too frequently been used to denigrate or exclude women. When that history is turned into tradition, it is always somewhat shocking to see black women who share equally in the hardships and struggles of the Black community removed from the text. Female genital mutilation is not a custom that originated with the arrival of Islam. However, because Islamic communities are characterized by an obsession with chastity and virginity, the practice of FGM was ideally suited to the requirements of this religion. Afro-American women experience both physical and psychological suffering as a result of racial and patriarchal violence and prejudice. They are marginalized twice or even three times. Pain, anguish, and hope are the beginning of their life journey. They all fight for a better tomorrow and do so for similar reasons. Women are constrained in a patriarchal mentality by their gender, religion, the patriarchal system, and numerous other obstacles. "Everything pertaining to women is monitored by men; they are not allowed to do anything they want, think independently, make decisions, go anywhere, or take care of themselves." (Majid 17)

Alice Walker has achieved the wonderful feat of becoming a highly accomplished and well-known African American author. She has attempted to highlight the problems and disappointment of these women through her writings, which can be discussed as a multicultural method of black women's authorization to some level. "A number of authors, including Alice Walker, Gloria Naylor and Toni Morrison, have shed light on these issues globally and have highlighted the fact that racism permeates Afro-American society, and as a result, women must put up with a lot" (Christian 8). The best book that depicts female circumcision is *Possessing the Secret of Joy* by Alice Walker.

The existential crises, male-dominated society, FGM, racism, and the search for identity are all discussed in this essay. They claim that forced female genital mutilation is part of their (African) tradition. They claim that Alice Walker sheds light on the wicked practice of genital mutilation and effectively depicts women as victims of male patriarchy in the corresponding novel. They also describe how Tashi experiences this while believing that this is her culture,

but she eventually comes to understand the reality and dark side of it when she experiences mental trauma. Her *Possessing the Secret of Joy* and Arun Joshi's book *The Foreigner*, in which Joshi describes a character named Sindi Oberoi who experiences both mental illness and trauma, are the two novels used in this study. This essay uses Tashi and Sindi Oberoi, the major protagonists, to compare and contrast the two works.

The psychological pain and cultural struggle in Alice Walker's *Possessing the Secret of Joy* are examined in this study. Its primary goal is to highlight the problems of African-Americans, especially women, and what they see as a violent, sexist, and racist culture, as well as the prejudice against both blacks and whites. The African custom of female circumcision is the source of Alice Walker's fury in this book. She bravely discusses female genital mutilation, or FGM, how it is imposed on women, how it is accepted as part of their culture, and how it affects their life. According to Alice Walker, female genital mutilation is a part of their (African) culture. "In the book, Alice Walker effectively portrays women as victims of male patriarchy and sheds light on the wicked practice of genital mutilation." (Anuradha and Suresh 282)

"Alice Walker discusses the various forms of female genital mutilation and primarily concentrates on the central theme of *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, which is female genital mutilation" (Birtia 30). She bravely discusses in great detail how women are maimed at a very young age with sharp objects like stones, swords, etc., which is extremely unsanitary and occasionally results in death from profuse bleeding. She then discusses how Tashi suffered after undergoing the third procedure of female genital mutilation at a much later age when she was about to get married. This is all due to the Olinkan tradition. She also focuses on a few other female characters in this essay that have experienced female genital mutilation.

Possessing the Secret of Joy is a sequel to Alice Walker's earlier book, *The Color Purple*. The book primarily focuses on female genital mutilation (FGM), but it also addresses racism, male dominance, and the subjugation of African women. Since she is a post-modernist author, she has employed the stream of consciousness technique in this book, which allows the reader to alternate between the past and the present. The book is divided into twenty-one sections, and the story is told by various characters connected to Tashi, the main protagonist, including Adam, her husband; Olivia, her husband's sister; Lisette, her husband's lover; M'lissa, a godly figure for the Olinkan people; Benny, the son of Tashi and Adam; and Perrie. The African custom of female circumcision is the source of Alice Walker's fury in this book. She bravely discusses FGM, how it is imposed on women, how it is accepted as part of their culture, and how it affects their life. We also learn that their women are merely objects for the male society's sexual gratification, and that their sole function is to please their husbands and provide for the family. If they do not undergo this FGM procedure, they are not accepted by the community. Alice Walker deprives Africa of the romanticized image that the Harlem Renaissance artists of the 1920s and black writers of the 1960s gave it.

There are aspects of cultural strife and psychological anguish in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. It refers to how a person views themselves in relation to other people, other societies, or when they interact with different cultures. Additionally, lunacy can be seen in this book when Tashi undergoes the circumcision ritual and thereafter experiences a variety of psychological problems. "She started painting a chicken repeatedly on ever-larger paper, explains Adam. The size of the paper hand seemed to diminish in relation to the hideous bird she was picturing, and she became agitated" (PSJ 73). This illustrates how, following her treatment at Lisette's uncle's house, she began overdrawing the image in her head due to psychiatric issues. "It took me a long time to realize that I was dead" (PSJ 3). In this passage, Tashi discusses the Panda story and draws comparisons to her own life. After going through

the mutilation process, Tashi was a walking corpse for a long time and had no idea who she was. As she states, “There was once a beautiful young panther that had a co-wife and a husband” (PSJ 3), she had no idea what she was doing. Her name was Lara, and the fact that her husband and her co-wife were deeply in love made her unhappy. Being kind to her was just a social obligation placed on them by Panther society. “They had no intention of marrying her” (PSJ 3).

The focus of *Possessing the Secret of Joy* is on the three female characters. Three distinct racial and ethnic groups—Tashi, Ayesha, and Amy Maxwell—are subjected to the chaos of FGM. Amy Maxwell is a European lady who is forcibly subjected to ceremonial female genital mutilation even though it is not a part of her culture, Ayesha is of Middle Eastern descent, and Tashi is African and subsequently African American. Men of all racial and socio-economic backgrounds demonstrate their masculinity by inflicting physical harm and hostility on women and children. Tashi lives in a small African village and is a member of the Olinka tribe. Although *Possessing the Secret of Joy* is not a direct sequel to *The Color Purple*, the main characters are still from the same town where Adam and Olivia, Celie’s children, reside.

The Olinka people follow various customs, such as female genital mutilation and facial scarification, which they refer to as their tradition when both men and women leave scars on their faces, demonstrating their blatant superstitious and lack of education. The Olinka people are compelled to live in the wild when the white people raid the hamlet. Despite losing their houses, they feel that they should continue their customs. M’Lissa, an elderly circumciser who coerces young girls into undergoing female genital mutilation (FGM), joined the Olinkan men. Despite this, Tashi communicates with Adam, an educated man who rejects terrible customs like female genital mutilation.

At first, Tashi doesn’t support the action, but after seeing firsthand how her people were uprooted from their homes, she begins to believe in it. Tashi chooses to voluntarily submit to the act despite Olivia and Adam’s advice not to. There isn’t a single family member nearby when Tashi gets circumcised. However, Adam returns right away after learning about the incident, marries her, and brings her to America in the hopes of starting a new, happy married life. However, she is unable to live a happy life because of the trauma. She has numerous physical and mental issues as a result of FGM. When Tashi gives birth to a kid named Benny, who is mentally challenged and solely caused by FGM, she is faced with the worst outcome of FGM.

Tashi’s poor physical and mental health as a result of her circumcision gradually overshadows her marriage. Tashi then questions why it is forbidden to discuss female genital mutilation in some communities and why women are forced to perform it. Tashi is unable to forget her circumciser, M’Lissa, also known as Tsunga, because of the entire occurrence, and she firmly believes that she is the cause of her problems. She chooses to kill M’Lissa in order to put a stop to the misery of all the girls and women in the tribe. She also acts on her own initiative, killing her when the chance arises. She is obviously being prosecuted in court after killing the most significant member of the community. She is ultimately put to death despite her husband and his sons’ best efforts to spare her.

Tashi is compelled to save young ladies who experience such suffering. She becomes so violent that she wants to get revenge for the psychological manipulation she was subjected to. Tashi makes the decision to travel to Olinka in order to murder M’Lissa, the mother of circumcision, who promotes and spreads infibulations. Using the same razors and blades that she had used to disfigure her and other women, Tashi deftly murders her. M’Lissa explains why this conduct provides her with a living and goes on to say that she has experienced similar suffering and that no one was able to save her. Because she adheres to the patriarchal belief

that it is a blessing to be murdered by the person she has infibulated, she is pleased that Tashi killed her. Tashi is on trial in Olinka for the murder of a patriarchal national symbol. After killing M'Lissa, a symbol of sexism and patriarchy, Tashi is apprehended, put on trial, and given the death penalty, yet she still feels at ease due to her hysteria and masochism.

In this book, Alice Walker illustrates the lifelong effects of female circumcision on young African tribal girls like Dura and Tashi. Such a mutilation procedure must be performed on a female "either shortly after birth or at the age of five or six, but certainly by the onset of puberty, ten or eleven" (PSJ. 62). This brutal procedure, which occasionally results in the death of innocent young black girls from bleeding, is regarded as a sacred rite and is commemorated by women who prepare special meals. The bodies of those who have been circumcised are bathed and oiled, and homes are specifically cleansed and cleaned. Giving the naive girls appealing items leads them to their demise.

Tashi recalls the time Dura was brought to a remote cabin to have the procedure done on her body. While hiding in the elephant grass, Tashi surreptitiously observed "a dazed row of little girls" sitting on the bare ground outside the cottage beneath the tree, but Dura was not one of them. "Dura was being held down and tortured inside the hut, as Tashi was aware" (PSJ. 73). She could hear Dura's horrible screams, which shattered the atmosphere and made her heart race. Suddenly there was quiet inside. Then M'Lissa hobbled out, dragging her crippled leg and carrying something so trivial and dirty that she was holding it between her toes rather than in her fingers. "Bled and bled and bled, and then there was death, Dura said. Nobody was accountable. No one to help me." (PSJ 81)

Alice Walker illustrates through the Dura event how black women's lives are perceived as a kind of chain of degradation, agonies, and deprivations to a normal existence due to the extreme agony and suffering brought on by black society's conventions and traditions. She believes that black society's traditions and behaviors are anti-human and anti-life. They transform a black woman's life into a tale of spiritual suffering in addition to bodily suffering. Certain customs prohibit Black women from living their lives as they see fit.

"Alice Walker focuses on the psychological aspects of society's sexual politics that can drive a woman to the brink of madness. Such a terrible practice has terrible immediate repercussions, but its long-term effects are even worse" (Singh 132). She demonstrates how Tashi's genital mutilation contributes to her psychological distress and irreversibly harms her psychology in addition to her physical suffering. Tashi not only loses a significant portion of her body as a result of genital mutilation, but her entire soul is also damaged, leaving her with a lingering sense of unease for the rest of her life. She has never been able to overcome these emotions throughout her life. Every act of making love causes her great anguish since her vagina is so tightly sewed that the channel has narrowed.

As a result, Tashi's normal sexual drives cease to exist, and her suppressed desires lead to psychological illness. This causes her to link this suffering to her sexual life. In addition to the scar between her legs, Tashi also carries a severe psychological scar. Not only has the circumcision removed her clitoris, but it has also prevented her from experiencing painful and degrading love. Her sense of self and her capacity for emotion have also been destroyed by it. Therefore, Tashi's natural way of existence is denied by society's genital mutilation norms, which force a black woman to have surgery and lose a valuable portion of her body because a man finds greater pleasure in hardship.

"Tashi undergoes a fundamental personality change after marrying Adam and changing her name to Evelyn in America." It's hard to say whether the psychological or physical alterations brought on by her excision are worse. Because she no longer knows who she is or

what her emancipation, if any, will be, the Tashi/Evelyn split alludes to the intricacy of the issue. She withdraws into her dream world, her imagination, and the realm of storytelling because she is sexually dead. Tashi creates her own imaginary existence since she is unable to accept reality. “My ideal life. I’m terrified to exist without it” (PSJ. 36). In her dream world, she begins to wander. She has a terrifying dream every night. Feeling depressed and unhappy, she starts to believe that she is trapped in a lofty, dark tower and that her wings are shattered. “I believe it to be a tower. I’m inside, but it’s tall. I’m never completely sure how it appears from the outside. At first, it’s cool, but as you go closer to where I’m being held, it gets colder and darker. There is a never-ending, monotonous sound that sounds like a baby’s fingernails lightly scraping paper. And in the dark, millions of things are moving around me. I am unable to see them. They have also damaged my wings.” (PSJ 27)

Tashi’s circumcision causes her bodily and mental suffering. She decided to get circumcised because she believed it would make her more like her sister, who she imagines to be a strong, unstoppable, fully African lady. However, she admits, “I was crazy,” as she starts to realize the truth about her culture, society, and the suffering women endure. However, she starts to respond emotionally and vehemently against the practice of female genital mutilation, which separates a woman from herself and prevents her from leading a normal life on her own terms, after learning about what males do to their own daughters when working with women.

Tashi is no longer ignorant to the traditions and catchphrases of her culture. She learns that everyone has the right to live their own life. She recognizes her own strength, makes a very important choice, and carries it out with determination and a strong will. The fact that she killed Tsunga, who was responsible for the deaths of other Tashis, in order to achieve her inner fulfillment, is a testament to her moral bravery. An adult and awakened Tashi travels back to Africa to exact revenge on M’Lissa, whom she believes is to blame for the death of Dura, the mutilation of millions of females, and the death of Tashi many years ago by the amputation of her genitalia. Tashi also murders M’Lissa. She is detained and put on trial for killing Tsunga, a piece of national property.

During her trials, Tashi expresses her rage at her accusers and speaks out against a male-dominated, chauvinistic culture where men control both the political and legal systems. For them, the anguish, sorrow, and misery that Tashi endures as a result of circumcision are meaningless. They don’t care about Tashi because Tsunga killed him many years ago. They just decide to have Tashi put to death by firing squad. However, Alice Walker demonstrates that Tashi ultimately prevails. She is thrilled to be put to death because she believes it will end the ongoing suffering caused by her genital circumcision.

In order to emphasize male dominance and the need for patriarchy to continue as a system that controls many women, including Tashi, Ayesha, and Amy Maxwell, on the physical, emotional, and psychic levels, the severe infibulations are kept as forbidden secrets. Women are pitted against one another and used as weapons to undermine each other's health and well-being. M’Lissa then says to Tashi, “I thought you were a fool, “The largest” (PSJ 237). Both the lady and any potential kid are harmed by circumcision. Benny Johnson is the name of Tashi’s son. Due to brain impairment sustained at birth, he is portrayed her as a mentally retired youngster. Tashi’s infibulations made the birth process difficult. The discovery of a hole in Tashi’s sexual organ shocks American physicians and nurses, who view circumcision as weird and pointless. Until the end of their lives, the mother and the child experience the negative consequences of circumcision.

Tashi makes an effort to support and educate other women. Women in that Olinka tribe have little autonomy over their bodies. It is evident from Tashi and M’lissa’s conversion that “a proper woman must be cut and sewn to fit only her husband, whose pleasure depends on an

opening, it might take months, even years to enlarge. Or the pain” (PSJ 208). In her book *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, Alice Walker is credited as being the first African American woman author to discuss female genital mutilation. Her ethnic, traditional beliefs on women alone are torturous and cannot be considered traditional. Alice Walker illustrates the issue and trauma African women experience in the practice of tradition through the heroine Tashi. She raises readers' awareness through the plots and characters. Walker wants women to have access to education, humanitarian social conventions and traditions to prevail, and everyone's well-being—male and female.

Possessing the Secret of Joy is a political critique of sexism and tribalism. The wounded African heroine, Tashi, gradually learns that white people are not to blame this time and ultimately realizes that her psychological problems are caused by African tribalism and sexism. Tashi constructs an alter personality in the fictional Lara, the rejected co-wife in one of her books, based on her difficulty of rejecting egoism, the false pride of African tribalism, and finding a distinct inner voice. Tashi's mental instability is partly caused by her fear of blood and her suppression of traditional pictures and their realities. The protagonist of the book *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, Tashi is a tribal African woman who was first seen in *The Color Purple* as a minor character. Her tragic choice to submit to the Tsunga's knife and be genitally mutilated causes her to experience a trauma that profoundly changes her life. She battles insanity for the remainder of her life, making a valiant effort through psychotherapy; she receives treatment from followers of both Freud and C. G. Jung, as well as from Jung himself, in an attempt to reclaim her sense of reality and 'self.' She doesn't start researching the mythological 'reasons' her ancient ancestors constructed for what was done to her and millions of other women and girls over thousands of years until she receives assistance from the most unlikely ally she can think of.

The way women show up to witness Tashi's execution, defying the male authority of the state's attempts to frighten them away, and the way Adam, Olivia, Benny, Pierre, Raye, and Mbatu arrive with a banner that reads, “RESISTANCE IS THE SECRET OF JOY” (PSJ. 264) is Alice Walker's greatest victory over her oppressors. As a result, Tashi inspires everyone to fight and defy their oppressors, and she becomes a source of support and fortitude for others. Alice Walker thus demonstrates a black woman's drive and resolve to break away from the limitations placed on her by societal norms through Tashi's actions. Walker gives the reader insight into how a black lady progressively realizes the value of her uniqueness and forges her identity via her actions. In actuality, Alice Walker's bravery and 'wholeness' as a person are what enable her to both write for and awaken women's rights.

In *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, Alice Walker skillfully addresses the most contentious topics of the day. In it, she eloquently explains how society's restrictive, oppressive, and dehumanizing roles prevent black women from thinking, making decisions, and living freely and bravely. The customs and rituals, such as circumcision, the celebration of womanhood, and scarification, which are regularly observed in some black communities, require a black woman to completely deny who she is. In this book, Alice Walker scrutinizes and challenges the African custom of female genital mutilation. These are the customs that are still widely followed today. According to Alice Walker, between 90 and 100 million women and girls currently residing in African, Far Eastern, and Middle Eastern nations have undergone genital mutilation. The growing practice of “female circumcision among immigrants from nations where it is customary has been covered in recent media pieces in the United States and Europe.” (PSJ 266)

Alice Walker's ability to deal with her intense grief increases along with her comprehension. Her bright wrath is beneath this grief. And this rage drives her to take action,

which results in two feelings: first, life, where she is able to live in the present with awareness, and second, death, where she discovers that her dread has entirely vanished. “Female circumcision, a custom in which a woman’s vagina is operated on and tightened to make it more enjoyable for men, is the reason why the novel depicts the appalling condition of women” (Peter 2). In this book, Alice Walker denounces the ancient practice of female genital mutilation. The female characters deal with the issue of living in a society where male patriarchy forces them to undergo circumcision. The gender politics underlying these vile actions are effectively depicted in the book.

In *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, Alice Walker depicts Tashi’s devastated body, mind, and spirit as well as her valiant battle against authoritarian male chauvinism that takes the shape of societal norms and traditions. Tashi not only endures suffering and mutilation as a result of the customs and traditions society imposes on women in order to make men powerful and maintain complete control over women, but she also challenges these traditions after awakening and discovers the secret to happiness. The book chronicles her spiral into insanity, her protracted struggle to save and rebuild herself, her return to Africa, her ultimate, expensive release, and her realization that “resistance is the secret of joy.”

Conclusion

In *Possessing the Secret of Joy* by Alice Walker, the infliction of psychological trauma and cultural conflict on Women explores the issues that women face following mutilation. The ritual of cutting or removing some or all of a woman’s external genitalia is known as female genital mutilation or circumcision. It is a topic of widespread interest that is practiced in numerous nations. In her book, Alice Walker introduces a fictional individual named Tashi who, upon circumcision, struggles indefinitely. In this book, Alice Walker also addresses post-traumatic stress disorder. The present study concentrated on how women’s lives were ruined by this wicked practice, which is socially created, has no medical justification, and is solely carried out in accordance with certain myths. This paper attempts to draw attention to the negative consequences of female circumcision, which include numerous serious psychological and cultural conflict issues that cause trauma to women. It has demonstrated how women are oppressed by this cruel practice in the name of culture, how a woman is mistreated throughout her life, and how her life is ruined. This research paper’s conclusion hides the fact that we can halt this cruel praxis by gaining knowledge and consciousness, which can only be achieved through feminist discussions that will assist women in doing so.

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அரண்

பன்னாட்டுத் தமிழாய்வு மின்னிதழ்

அறிவிப்பு / Announcement

அன்பான தமிழ்ச் சொந்தங்களே

வணக்கம்.

வரும் 2026, ஏப்ரல் மாதம் வெளிவரும் அரண் பன்னாட்டுத் தமிழாய்வு மின்னிதழ்க்கான ஆய்வுக் கட்டுரைகள் ஆய்வாளர்களிடமிருந்து வரவேற்கப்படுகின்றன.

கட்டுரை வந்து சேர வேண்டிய கடைசி நாள் - ஏப்ரல் 10. அதற்கு பின் வரும் கட்டுரைகள் ஏப்ரல் இதழில் இடம்பெறாது என்பதை தெரிவித்துக் கொள்கிறோம்.

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