

INSCRIPTIONS ON THE AFRICAN BODY: ALICE WALKER'S *POSSESSING THE SECRET OF JOY*

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Abstract:

The final novel of Alice Walker's African trilogy, *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992), stands out within Walker's writing as the literary text that comes closest to political activism. This paper aims at analyzing the inscription of/on the African woman's body in *Possessing the Secret of Joy* by close reading the major episodes in the novel related to the experience of female circumcision in Africa and the search for psychological healing in Europe and the United States. The analysis suggests that Alice Walker constructs two archetypes of female complicity with patriarchy, "the betraying mother" and "the betrayed daughter", and has them destroy themselves and each other because of their belief in, and questioning of, ritual female circumcision. The paper highlights that the novel's campaign against this problematic aspect of traditional African culture represents a serious literary and political challenge, contributing to a demystification of romanticized African-American representations of Africa.

Keywords: *Alice Walker, "Possessing the Secret of Joy", female circumcision, Africa, patriarchy, womanism*

The final novel of Alice Walker's African trilogy, *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992), takes over the alluded theme of African ritual female mutilation from the more famous *The Color Purple* (1982) by picking up on the character of Tashi, a young African woman who underwent a mysterious rite of 'initiation'. While in the second novel of her African trilogy, *The Temple of My Familiar* (1989), the African-American writer looked back to African matriarchal cultures as a source of inspiration for gaining freedom from patriarchal control, in *Possessing the Secret of Joy* Walker illustrates a different position towards the African heritage by criticizing the tradition of female genital mutilation and actively fighting its underlying, patriarchal and matriarchal, oppressive layers. As one scholar observed, *Possessing the Secret of Joy* is a "text that acts as a revolutionary manifesto for dismantling systems of domination" (Kuhne 74).

Possessing the Secret of Joy stands out within Alice Walker's writing in many ways. Firstly, it is the most 'African' of her novels. Although some scenes take place in Europe or the United States, most of the action develops in the invented Africa of the Olinka tribe, a fictional construction that serves as a background for highlighting the many layers of ideological oppression to which the women populating the novel are subject to. Secondly, its subject matter makes the novel a difficult text – difficult even to read since painful and revolting. In fact, "one does not want to read *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. Instead, clutching one's stomach...one wants to howl to the winds and the heavens in angry protest and despair" (Kuhne 74); and yet one cannot help but read on. Thirdly, *Possessing the Secret of Joy* is Walker's literary text that comes closest to political activism, as shall be shown below.

The declared purpose of the book is to expose its readership to the horror of female genital mutilation and to save young girls and women from being disfigured in the varying name of tradition, religion, patriotism, etc. As Walker makes the message clear in a note to the reader, an estimated "ninety to one hundred million women and girls living today in African, Far Eastern and Middle Eastern countries have been genitally mutilated" (Walker 266). Moreover, the author pledged to donate some of the royalties from *Possessing the Secret of Joy* to "educate women and girls, men and boys, about the hazardous effects of genital mutilation, not simply on the health and happiness of individuals, but on the whole society in which it is practiced, and the world" (Walker 266).

Lest the reader be confused, the novel is dedicated "with tenderness and respect to the blameless vulva" (Walker 1), and the narrative never ceases to remind that the protagonist's soul has been "dealt a mortal blow" by circumcision. Similarly, the text makes an aim of constantly drawing comparisons between the fate of the circumcised and that of the uncircumcised. Amongst the most explicit of these is the opposition between the white French woman's orgasmic experience of childbirth and Tashi's profoundly painful and traumatic one. On another level, as shall be seen below, the novel explores Tashi's own vacillation between the roles of victim and activist.

As mentioned above, although some scenes in the novel take place in Europe or the United States, the larger part of the action is set in the invented Africa of the Olinka tribe first introduced in *The Color Purple*. The story is told from a number of perspectives, mainly those of Tashi, Adam, and Olivia – characters from *The Color Purple*. In fact, *Possessing the Secret of Joy* retells some events that occurred in *The Color Purple* from a different perspective. For instance, in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, Olivia recalls in mature hindsight the day when her brother, Adam, and she arrived in the Olinka village where their parents had gone to work as missionaries. Olivia's impressions of the remoteness of the village echo Celie's perception of the village rendered in *The*

Color Purple. In recalling the same trip described in *The Color Purple*, Olivia remembers that “We had been weeks on the march that brought us to Tashi’s village... I remember looking up at my father and thinking what a miracle it was that we’d somehow – through jungle, grassland, across rivers and whole countries of animals – arrived in the village of the Olinka that he’d spoken so much about” (Walker 7). In an instance of narrative irony and anticipatory construction, the evening that Olivia and her family arrive in Olinka, Tashi’s older sister bleeds to death after being ritually mutilated. This event sets the tone for the story to follow, a tale that is delivered piece by piece in bursts of what appears to be the interior monologue of Tashi and of the people close to her.

The construction of the Olinka tribe as the African setting and matrix of oppression immediately brings the novel into confrontation with the notions of native tradition and colonialism. At the beginning of the novel, Tashi is shown to undergo circumcision as an anti-colonial gesture. She refers to it “not as a wound but as a healing” (Walker 60), an autonomous response to the economic and cultural rape of the Olinka tribe by the colonizers. It is only later that she begins, first through a dream, to understand the role of circumcision within a different layer of (patriarchal) oppression. Her Freudian dream of the enormous cockerel, puffed up by “his diet of submission” (Walker 76 et seq.), represents a key turning point in this process of ideological realignment. By the time of her final trial and sentence in Olinka, the shift away from her initial anti-colonialist analysis is made clear: “White is not the culprit this time. Bring me out paper of the colors of our flag” (Walker 264).

In condemning the patriarchal African tradition, Walker makes it clear that Olinkan women must share the responsibility for their oppression. A special group of women, called *tsunga*, are empowered to perform the surgery, and many women pay to be re-sawn after the birth of each child. The novel implies that, if the practice of genital mutilation is to be ended, women must themselves resist the procedure by any means necessary, just as Tashi resists by killing her circumciser, M’Lissa. The end of the text ironically comes full circle to a moment in which the condemned Tashi is confronted, on the one hand, with the freeing recognition that “resistance is the secret of joy” (Walker 264) and, on the other hand, with the ultimate oppression of being denied her life.

Complicating an already heavy novel, Walker presents readers of *Possessing the Secret of Joy* with a controversial narrative about AIDS and Africa. While awaiting execution, Tashi is housed in a prison that also serves as an AIDS ward; she and her American family begin working in the ward and discover a supposed originator of the disease in a character named Hartford. According to *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, cultures grown on monkey kidneys harvested by Hartford were used to produce a tainted vaccine that carried with it the immune deficiency virus that supposedly causes AIDS (Walker 245). The AIDS passage, scholars believe, is linked to the concern with genital mutilation

as it completes the anti-colonialist statement on Walker's part: because both Western and male ideologies posit the Other (African, female) as a commodity for the power elite, "in discussing a ritual that is traditionally taboo and in verbalizing a creation myth for AIDS that is vehemently denied by dominant groups, Walker deconstructs the silence that helps to empower these groups" (Kuhne 76). Moreover, the insertion of this controversial AIDS narrative serves as an outlet for disbelief and eventually contributes to the aim of raising controversy. By contrast, the main narrative against female circumcision, a brutal ritual that was once largely unknown and silenced in the West, becomes a mainstream topic.

To the aim of mainstreaming the (critique of this) controversial topic, *Possessing the Secret of Joy* provides its readers with a great amount of information about genital mutilation and its history, much of which is instilled during the psychoanalytical sessions Tashi is subjected to. At one point, an Olinkan creation myth is said to have been the origin of the practice (Walker 219 et seq). As a child, Tashi heard a group of men talking about the myth and its relation to the genital mutilation of women. She remembers the men saying that genital mutilation was God's way because "God liked it fighting" (Olinka men are said to enjoy forcing their way into women who have been sewn shut), and "God liked it tight" (Walker 221). Tashi pedagogically explains that there are three types of circumcision: "Some cultures demanded excision of only the clitoris, others insisted on a thorough scraping away of the entire genital area" (Walker 112); she herself had experienced the most severe form of all, infibulation. As scholars have noted, Tashi was once a woman who took pleasure in her body, but after her female initiation, she is ever "embarrassed by the shuffling walk and the odor that are characteristic results of the procedure . . . [and] neither she nor Adam, her husband, could ever again experience the sexual pleasure they had before the operation" (Kuhne 75).

By contrast to the traditional developmental dynamics of Walker's earlier texts such as *The Color Purple*, which witnesses the growth of its protagonist Celie into a free, enterprising woman, the (non-)development of character is subordinated to the thematic concerns in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. This does not entirely mean that the novel is not interested in questions of subjectivity; in fact, to a great extent, the text formalizes its psychological and psychoanalytic interests, especially in relation to repression, through the analysis of Tashi conducted by none other than Carl Jung (called "Mzee" by the protagonist) and then by the African-American psychoanalyst Raye. Moreover, the novel's original composition as a mosaic of the characters' independent interior monologues makes it a record of complete subjectivity without the appearance of external interference.

Two of the major focal points of the text are Tashi's experiences in relation to circumcision in Olinka, and her attempts to be psychically healed in

Europe and the United States. Clearly, one of the problems that arise out of this narrative strategy is that it can easily become a schematic comparison between “oppressive/traditional” Africa versus Western freedom and advancement. Africa is liable to become the site of a pathological sexuality and morality, whilst the West becomes, as always, the site of intellectual, medical, psychoanalytic, political, etc. enlightenment. Both the novel and the subsequent film make strenuous but not entirely successful efforts to avoid this potentially racist scenario.

Tashi herself is a character torn between different worlds: the tribal world of the Olinka and the Western way as presented by the black American missionary family. She becomes friends with the Americans and enters a relationship with Adam, the son of the missionaries; Adam is the exterior cause that makes Tashi rebel against her Olinkan culture, when for instance, they break the most important of all the Olinkan taboos by making love in the fields.

Because of the influence of the missionaries, Tashi does not undergo the “female initiation”, which the Olinka call the “bath”, at the proper age. It is only later, when the war for Olinkan independence is under way, that Tashi submits to the ritual. She invites the mutilation because of the teachings of an Olinkan revolutionary called “Our Leader” – for colonial rulers forbade the utterance of his name: “From prison Our Leader said we must keep ourselves clean and pure as we had been since time immemorial – by cutting out unclean parts of our bodies.” The custom is said to help preserve femininity: “Everyone knew that if a woman was not circumcised her unclean parts would grow so long they’d soon touch her thighs; she’d become masculine and arouse herself. No man could enter her because her own erection would be in the way” (Walker 112). This invented mythical “explanation” gives myth a bad name but does serve its aim of highlighting the absurdity of the custom. Tashi, then, undergoes mutilation as a way to get back in touch with the culture she had abandoned by accepting Christianity and the Western ways. Ironically, Tashi’s infibulation stems from a desire for strength and independence through, paradoxically, obedience to what the Olinkans call “our leader”; the auctorial decision to make Tashi *choose* to undergo mutilation foregrounds the power of ideological and cultural indoctrination, as well as the related issue of women’s complicity with their own victimization.

Nevertheless, having regretted this decision for the rest of her life and lived its debilitating consequences, she decides to strike back by killing her circumciser, M’Lissa, the woman who has become an Olinkan hero for having preserved the tradition. Within the economy of the novel, Tashi’s original sin of complicity traps her within an inescapable cycle of victimization. In fact, the novel presents an emphatic and consistent focus on death and suicide as means of escape from what the protagonist perceives as a dead-end situation: Tashi’s

(absent) flesh continues to dominate the novel and parallels the lifelessness of Tashi's post-excision existence.

On the one hand, the text is framed by Tashi's descriptions of her own death-in-life. The novel begins: "I did not realize for a long time that I was dead" (Walker 3). The equation of life and death is maintained in the closing signature: "Tashi Evelyn Johnson. Reborn, soon to be Deceased" (Walker 262). On the other hand, death and suicide structure the entire plot of the novel. *Possessing the Secret of Joy* opens with Tashi's story of Lara the panther, which suggests a very poetic, but nevertheless suicidal, death as a way out. Later on, mutilation is portrayed explicitly as a metaphorical murder and as a form of enslavement that connotes a living death. Toward the end of the novel, when the protagonist seems to have come out of her metaphorical death and to have reached self-consciousness through therapy sessions and anthropological explanations for her nightmares, Tashi commits a suicidal murder, which she does not try to hide but, on the contrary, confesses – a confession that will lead to her execution.

Clearly, the fact that circumcision is almost universally a procedure carried out on girls by older women rather than by men is one problematic aspect that Walker's text needs to address. At the beginning of the novel, M'Lissa is presented as the murderer of Tashi's sister Dura and the mutilator of other girls. However, as the novel progresses, the victim/aggressor relation between the two women shifts in interesting ways; not only does M'Lissa herself emerge as the victim of a violent infibulation, she is also ultimately revealed as a worshipper of women's sexual pleasure, for whom religious faith consists only in the belief that "the God of woman is autonomy" (Walker 207). Unlike M'Lissa's victimization, Tashi's own infibulation is voluntary. In a crucial reversal, at the end of the text Tashi finds herself fulfilling and glorifying the traditional destiny of the circumciser, who traditionally is to be killed and burned by a woman she has herself circumcised. In M'Lissa's final monologue, the 'I' who speaks first refers to the circumciser, but then shades subtly into that of Tashi herself. The narrative, then, merges their apparently separated roles and reveals their mutual entrapment within a cycle of self-sustaining oppression.

Thus the novel tells the story of two kinds of women: those who are forbidden the possession of the secret of joy, the right to own their bodies in natural totality, and those who forbid others this right. Walker constructs the two archetypes – "the betraying mother" and "the betrayed daughter" – and embodies their conflict in the relationship between Tashi and M'Lissa, who destroy themselves and each other because of their belief in, and questioning of, ritual female circumcision.

The controversial issue of female complicity with patriarchy as illustrated by the relation between the two characters of Tashi and M'Lissa has often been dealt with in terms of the racism of white against black women, and there are

few literary antecedents for Walker's analysis of this complicity within the black community. Examples include Hopkins's *Contending Forces*, Nella Larsen's *Passing*, or Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. The need to publicly counter the dimensions of violence in the private sphere of the home and sexuality is emphasized by Tashi in the gesture she makes after returning to Africa to kill the *tsunga* who mutilated her: "If you lie to yourself about your own pain, you will be killed by those who will claim you enjoyed it" (Walker 164).

The utter "grimness" (Fabi, 234) of Tashi's resulting story is very effective as a tool to advance the author's condemnation of genital mutilation, but it also creates representational tensions and incongruities for Alice Walker, who is much more used to focusing on "contrary women" who attempt, and oftentimes succeed, to fight back. On the contrary, in *Possessing the Secret of Joy* the protagonist is completely trapped by her (absent) flesh, and even when she realizes what was done to her and learns to condemn it, she still does not shift her focus from death, except for a fleeting observation: "Just at the end of my life, I am beginning to reinhabit completely the body I long ago left" (Walker, 183). Tashi lives only long enough to understand what happened to her and to explain it to the reader. The theatricality of her death and the elaborate, crowded staging of her execution, lend a tragic aura to Tashi's resigned and self-sacrificial acceptance of death, which is nevertheless an act of self-destruction like that of Lara the panther. The double scene with Olivia that frames the novel is in this regard very significant: Tashi chooses both her initial metaphorical death by circumcision and her final execution, a repetition that marks the inescapability of her continuous victimization.

The protagonist's conviction that she would never "be able to write a book about [her] life, nor even a pamphlet, but that write *something* [she] could and would" (Walker 210) has evident meta-narrative significance. Tashi's relationship to writing contrasts most obviously with Walker's characterization of Celie, who "writes herself into being", but recalls Walker's previous literary explorations of the "conundrum that the African-American literary tradition is, in a sense, founded on the bodies of raped and mutilated ancestors" (Fabi 234). With Tashi, Walker expands this conundrum to Africa: the protagonist's death affords her the mythical aura of a founding mother. Tashi's suicide, in fact, is depicted as inspirational for women of the younger generation like Mbatl.

The emphasis on death and the inescapability of the past therefore creates a martyr rather than an agent of resistance. The passivity that Tashi sees as resulting from her mutilation seems to constitute part of her consciousness, not just her condition. "Self-possession will always be impossible for us to claim" (Walker 256), she tells Mbatl; such a declaration of dependence allows no vision of social change for (African) women, picturing them as fully determined by their condition; "but perhaps your daughter..." (Walker 256), she adds.

In fact, Tashi is a martyr who only permits herself to be a martyr, as Walker (after her experimentations with closure in *The Color Purple*, and *The Temple of My Familiar*) allows herself not to avoid a typical “suggestion of the older structuring plots”: death (Fabi 234). As a result, *Possessing the Secret of Joy* can be read as a typical tragedy against a romance like *The Color Purple*, to which Walker explicitly refers in one of the quotations that precede the novel. In *The Color Purple*, Walker decided to liberate Celie “from her own history” because she “wanted her to be happy” even at the cost of failing the conventions of the realistic novel and steering towards a romance, but in *Possessing the Secret of Joy* Walker does not allow her protagonist the possibility of deliverance (other than death) from her tragic destiny of imprisonment in her own (absent) flesh.

As regards the representational tensions suggested above, the difficulty of reconciling the activist writer’s call for social change with the resigned victimization of the protagonist emerge very clearly on at least two occasions in the novel. The first is Tashi’s last conversation with her spiritual daughter Mbat: the connection between political change and the affirmation of life that characterized *The Color Purple* is weakened here by Tashi’s insistent acceptance of death. However, to Mbat’s determination not to have a child because “the world is entirely too treacherous”, Tashi replies: “Are you saying we should just let ourselves die out? And the hope of wholeness with us?” (Walker 257) In thus distinguishing between individual and collective suicide, Walker makes clear that Tashi’s choice of death must remain unique. Against Tashi’s individual death, the ending opposes the living bodies of the (also circumcised) demonstrators and of their baby girls.

The same representational tensions also emerge in the contrast between the end of the novel and the subsequent note of “Thanks”. The novel closes with an execution and with Tashi’s (?) last words: “I am no more. And satisfied.” (Walker 264) The note of “Thanks”, however, begins with a hymn to life: “Despite the pain one feels in honestly encountering the reality of life, I find it a wonderful time to be alive”, the author confesses, as she feels “reassured... that human compassion is equal to human cruelty and that it is up to each of us to tip the balance” (Walker 269). Walker thus recuperates, although abruptly, the sense of hope and the emphasis on agency that she had keenly conveyed in *The Color Purple*.

The representational tensions highlighted above tend to emphasize the Manichean structure of *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. In texts such as *The Color Purple*, Walker combined the criticism of sexual violence with a comprehensive analysis of the historical, social, and personal contexts which enabled the reader to understand the characters’ reactions. On the contrary, the underlying Manichean structure of *Possessing the Secret of Joy* outlines (and critiques) in very broad strokes the power dynamics that inform such traditional practices as

genital mutilation in Africa, without allowing for a further investigation of the cultural and individual issues underlying it. That, however, serves better the declared aim of the novel, although one could have expected more in-depth explanations than the apparent ignorance and acceptance or an indoctrination so complete as to inhibit any possibility of resistance. Walker does refer to these issues in Tashi's opening conversation with Olivia, but she moves on quickly to depict the devastating effects of genital mutilation because her focus is on transmitting the full horror of the situation. In this context, mutilation is broadly portrayed as a strategy to force women into submission, and Walker will not lead the reader to comprehend the practice. This choice to merely sweep the surface enables Walker to expand the problem of genital mutilation in Africa to include widely diverse forms of female oppression (frigidity as a form of psychological mutilation, foot-binding in Asia, clitoridectomy in the West). Thus the wide basis of the novel's political message becomes at once the source of its power and of its weakness.

Because of the strong reaction *Possessing the Secret of Joy* seeks, Walker herself is very much conscious about the "otherness" of her characters, as becomes clear in her appendix "To the Reader" (where she lists the secondary sources she consulted on genital mutilation), as well as in her disclaimers about the vague geographical African location of the novel and her invention of the Olinka tribe. Such consciousness, however, does not necessarily weaken the argument; on the contrary, at the same time that Walker claims the author's prerogative to imagination, her scruples regarding geographical and cultural inaccuracy serve as a means of authenticating the acontextual reality of the narrative.

Reading *Possessing the Secret of Joy* has been deemed an exercise in reading culture (Gourdine 237); an exercise in reading womanist culture, one might add. Alice Walker is said to examine the African soul of her protagonist, with ritual female circumcision as the vehicle for that examination. That is because, firstly, the novel's actions focus on the rite of female circumcision. Secondly, its author is an African-American woman, and so are most of its characters. Thirdly, the protagonist is an African recently immigrated to the United States with her black American husband. The latter offers the "ideal" African American, embodying the culture of Africa and inhabiting the geographical space of the United States. On this African/American background, the practice is viewed in the novel as a means through which African women are rendered joyless and spiritually dead, and Walker struggles to reconcile the two warring cultural consciousnesses – Tashi's initial conviction that the ritual defines her as an Olinkan woman and her later American experience and acknowledgement of the ritual as being covertly enforced upon her by patriarchal oppression. In the novel, the sense of Tashi's double allegiance is suggested by the varying references to her as "Tashi", renamed in America

“Evelyn”, “Evelyn Johnson”, designating double and triple identities symbolically brought together in the names of “Tashi-Evelyn” and “Tashi-Evelyn-Mrs. Johnson”. This clearly duplicates Du Bois’s own conceptualization of the African-American’s double consciousness, the experience of “two souls, two unreconciled strivings” (DuBois 3).

Tashi’s body thus serves as the stage upon which the work of African-American identity should be performed. Yet Tashi is an African and an American, but not simultaneously; her identity has been chronologically segregated by the transatlantic journey. To M’Lissa’s question “What does an American look like?” her final answer is “An American looks like me” (Walker 2000). Yet Tashi is unable to pledge full allegiance to either or both and is aware that the two identities are different – connected by her own spatial re-contextualization but inherently separate. It is only within the gap produced by Tashi’s displacement from Africa that her experiences with ritual female circumcision can be examined.

Walker’s focus on this deeply problematic aspect of traditional African culture represents a great challenge to the general romanticizing of “roots” by African-American writers and critics. From her first published collection, *Once* (1968), there is a constant refusal in Walker’s writing to equate liberation for the black American with a romanticized vision of Africa. What is particularly significant about *Possessing the Secret of Joy* in this respect is that by taking such a specific focus and by grounding itself so obviously in existing conditions, it forces the reader to acknowledge the many sources of the black woman’s oppression. This is in keeping with the politics of *The Color Purple* and *The Temple of My Familiar*, in each of which liberation seems only to be achievable first “within”.

Walker seems unbothered by the fact that, in bringing forth a tradition of institutionalized sexual violence very much present in Africa, as well as in Asia and the Middle East, she not only risks disappointing a large number of her more reluctant readers who only expect aesthetic catharsis out of literary works, but also produces a dilemma for her more ideologically aware supporters, who are forced by the novel into a confrontation with the principle of respect for cultural difference.

In conclusion, Alice Walker’s literary writing is not affected by its womanist agenda; actually, it becomes equivalent to it. Rather than repeating orthodox agendas of literature and politics, it is marked by an impetus to confront the blocks and complicities in the path of its womanist stance. In *The Color Purple*, this means challenging the ethical centrality of feminine self-sacrifice and the rejection of the African-American Christian tradition. In *The Temple of My Familiar*, this implies the attempt to forge a union between feminist politics and pre-colonial African notions of identity. In *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, this means the willingness to confront oppressive traditional

African practices, even at the risk of complicity with racist assumptions about African “barbarity”. In each of these cases, it is possible to see how the ideological concerns of her texts seem to override literary considerations of readerly expectations – including in what Africa is concerned.

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