CHAPTER VI

Possessing the Secret of Joy:
The Wounded Psyche
Alice Walker's recent novel *Possessing the Secret of Joy* is about an African woman, whose African self is Tashi and American self is Evelyn. She flees to the West in order to escape the traditional circumcisers. The whole novel is about how the protagonist struggles her way out in search of healing for her physical and psychological illnesses.

In an interview with Walker, Paula Giddings notes that the "main thrust" of criticism against *Possessing the Secret of Joy* will be the charge against American and Western intervention in African affairs. Walker responds to the accusation by asserting her ancestral relationship to African women. Slavery, says Walker, gives her the right to intervene in African affairs. She is, from her point of view, "speaking for my great-great-great-grandmother who came here with all this pain in her body."1 Although Walker describes herself as a distant family member, her tone and language clearly indicate that she believes to be distinctly unrelated to Africans who might criticize her novel. She says, "The other answer is when Africans get in trouble, whom do they call? Everybody. They call on people they shouldn't even talk to -- trying to raise money, appealing to people to fight their battles, buying guns from Russia and the United States. So they can accept what I -- someone who loves my former home -- am saying. They don't have a leg to stand on, so they better not start hopping around me." 2

Female circumcision is described as "a blatant symbol of the oppression of women and the patriarchy's determination to control women's productivity
and their sexuality."

Fran Hosken says that circumcision, "genital mutilation," is "a violation of human rights." For Gloria Steinem it is a demonstration of patriarchy at its worst, a metaphor for the "psychic mutilation" that women suffer everywhere at the hands of their male "oppressors." Mary Daly's passionate outcry against what she calls "unspeakable atrocities" in Gyn/Ecology names the practices, "for what they are: barbaric and demonic rituals."

Tashi, out of loyalty to her African origins, chooses to undergo a wounding circumcision, much to her regret. Walker chooses to bring to light a very complicated and delicate matter which has a long history reaching far back to the misty tribal past. In a postscript to her novel she gives a statistical record and claims that ninety to one hundred million women and girls have been genitally mutilated. It is observed and found that it is often desired by the girls themselves or by the mothers that their daughters undergo such mutilation. In the novel Tashi obliques to undergo the painful process. She willingly accepts the ritual. To go uncircumcised in some African cultures is to forgo an essential rite of passage, to suffer ridicule and neglect and to make one less nubile. Tashi wanted to be accepted as a real woman by the Olinka people.

Olivia, Tashi's African-American Christian friend, pleads with her not to go through the ceremony. But Tashi is quite adamant. She says, "Who are you and your people never to accept us as we are? Never to imitate any of our ways? It is always we who have to change." Olivia begs her not to do this to Adam, since Adam, Olivia's brother, was much in love with Tashi. Although Olivia asks Tashi not to do it, she understands why Tashi must go through it.
"It is a way" says Olivia that "the Olinka can show they still have their own ways, even though the white man has taken everything else." "Tashi" she continues "didn’t want to do it, but to make her people feel better, she’s resigned." When Nettie suggests that initiation is dangerous, that Tashi can become infected Olivia responds, "I know, I told her nobody in America or Europe cuts off pieces of themselves." Olivia feels that Tashi should have had it when she was eleven, if she was going to have it, and that she is too old to have it now. Olivia says that Tashi is happy that the initiation ceremony is not done in Europe or America and that makes it even more valuable to her.

Walker uses Tashi to offer arguments for tribal customs and uses the enlightened American Evelyn as her voice in the novel. Walker condemns this practice and reveals her views through Evelyn. Tashi chooses to get herself circumcised, driven by emotion rather than by intellect. She wanted the operation because she recognized it as the only remaining definitive stamp of the Olinka tradition. Tashi’s desire to be identified as a typical Olinkan woman paves the way for the ritual. "The operation she’d had done to herself joined her, she felt, to these women, whom she envisioned as strong, invincible. Completely woman. Completely African. Completely Olinka. In her imagination, on her long journey to the camp, they had seemed terribly bold, terribly revolutionary and free. She saw them leaping to the attack" (61). Tashi even feels proud of her culture. Here and there a defiant cheek bore the mark of her withered tribe. Those marks Tashi says "gave me courage. I wanted such a mark for myself" (23).
But it was only when she was told by M'Lissa, who one day unbound her legs, that she might sit up and walk a few steps that she noticed her own proud walk had become a shuffle. Tashi's evaluation of the ritual changes completely and takes a different turn once she arrives in the United States. She feels that her choice is not an informed choice. Adam goes in search of Tashi. He convinces M'Lissa and brings Tashi to his home. He marries her inspite of her protests that in America he would grow ashamed of her because of the scars on her face. Adam also carves the same Olinka tribal markings into his own cheeks in order to save Tashi from feeling embarrassed of her scars on the face. But the hidden scar between Tashi's thin legs that gave her the classic Olinka woman's walk in which the feet appear to slide forward changed Tashi completely. She was no longer cheerful or impish. Her movements had become slow and passive. A look into her eyes revealed that her soul had been dealt a mortal blow.

Her marriage to Adam and her arrival in the U.S., enables Tashi to look critically at her culture. She realizes that the practice their mothers and foremothers were following was nothing but a barbaric practice -- mutilating oneself. Mary Daly in her book describes the elder women of the tribe who take up an active part in mutilating the bodies of their young as "pawns, mentally castrated participants in the destruction of their own kind; the "female token torturers."

Awa Thiam in her *Black Sisters, Speak Out*, despite her adamant rejection of the practice of female circumcision and her tireless efforts to eradicate it, praises the elder women who are the preservers of culture. She says:
But it was women in particular who took it upon themselves to preserve certain customs. We should pay them tribute. It is because our mothers, our elders, had the charge of children that they were -- and remain -- responsible for training them, for transmitting certain myths and beliefs, and instilling in them a spirit of submission to custom. In refusing to allow Black African civilization to be destroyed, our mothers were revolutionary. Yet some people describe this attitude as conservative. These women felt the need to preserve something that was precious to them -- their cultural heritage. They became aware of something urgent that needed to be done; something had to be saved -- that something which was indispensable to the preservation of the Black African as such: the Black African civilization. This was their aim, and in this they succeeded by dint of insisting on maintaining ancestral practices. Although they do not challenge their state of bondage to men, we nevertheless pay tribute to these women.10

In the novel the Doctor who undertakes Tashi's case remarks that Negro women "can never be analysed effectively, because they can never bring themselves to blame their mothers" (17). It is the mothers, Thiam points out, who carry out the task of circumcision. But it is not so in the case of Tashi. Tashi's mother had become Christian and she had turned a deaf ear to M'Lissa who had argued with her to have the operation done for Tashi at the proper age. M'Lissa reveals to Tashi that Tashi's mother was indeed guilty of Tashi's sister Dura's death. She feels that if Dura is not bathed no one will marry her. Tashi feels sorry for her mother. She writes to Lisette, Adam's lover, that, "In truth, my mother was not equipped, there was not enough of her self left to her, to think about me. Or about my sister Dura, who bled to death after a botched circumcision, or about any of her other children. She had just sunk into her role of 'She Who Prepares the Lambs for Slaughter' " (259).

Tashi's psycho-traumatic case is taken up by an old man Carl who is by profession a psychiatrist and uncle to Lisette. Tashi discloses her deep hidden
thoughts to him. She reveals her thoughts in the form of paintings. She starts painting the picture of a series of ever large and more fearsome fighting cock. Gradually Tashi’s memories are brought out one by one. She draws a foot which grows in size along with the cock. She realizes that there is something the foot is holding between its toes. It was for this small thing that the giant cock waited, crowing impatiently, extending its neck, ruffling its feathers, and strutting about. Tashi feels sick and nauseous. She perspires profusely and shivers every moment of her painting. She feels that every system in her body and every connecting circuit in her brain was making an effort to shut down. As she paints, she remembers the howls of pain and terror coming from an isolated hut. She says:

Underneath a tree, on the bare ground outside the hut, lay a dazed row of little girls, though to me they seemed not so little. They were all a few years older than me. Dura’s age. Dura, however, was not among them; and I knew instinctively that it was Dura being held down and tortured inside the hut. Dura who made those inhuman shrieks that rent the air and chilled my heart. Abruptly, inside, there was silence. And then I saw M’Lissa shuffle out dragging her lame leg, and at first I didn’t realize she was carrying anything, for it was so insignificant and unclean that she carried it not in her fingers but between her toes. A chicken — a hen, not a cock — was scratching futilely in the dirt between the hut and the tree where the other girls, their own ordeal over, lay. M’Lissa lifted her foot and flung this small object in the direction of the hen, and she, as if waiting for this moment, rushed toward M’Lissa’s upturned foot, located the flung object in the air and then on the ground, and in one quick movement of beak and neck, gobbled it down. (70-71)

The foot Tashi painted on the wall, lame, subservient, mindless — as if disconnected from the body of the woman above it -- belonged to M’Lissa, a venerated elder woman circumciser, the tsunga, Walker’s word for circumciser.

“Tsunga,” says Walker, “like many of my ‘African’ words, is made up. Perhaps
it, and the other words I use, are from an African language I used to know, now tossed up by my unconscious.” Walker continues saying, “I do not know from what part of Africa my African ancestors came, and so I claim the continent. I suppose I have created Olinka as my village and the Olinkans as one of my ancient, ancestral tribal peoples. Certainly I recognize Tashi as my sister” (267-268).

Tashi remembers painfully the sad and pitiable death of her sister, Dura, who bled and bled and then died. No one was responsible for her death. Tashi still remembers Dura’s screamings. Tashi’s initiation not only affects her personally but also has its effects on her family. She gives birth to a son Bentu Moraga (Benny) who turns out to be dull and retarded for some small vital part of his brain has been crushed during delivery. During her stay in the hospital, Tashi is treated as if she were some creature from beyond their imaginings. She had become a creature, for the nurses, hospital staff, and the medical students. At last she is saved by Adam who puts a stop to the sideshow of her body.

Adam, during his stay in Olinka, becomes friendly with a French girl Lisette. Lisette visits Adam as part of the youth group of her church. Both become very friendly and spend several hours alone in each other’s company. Lisette used to accompany Adam to the hut of Torabe, an old Olinkan deserted by the village people for his inability to control his wife. Adam assigned to feed, wash and dress the old man’s sores, used to feel relieved chatting with Lisette. Adam’s friendship continues even after his marriage. He felt greatly relieved in the company of Lisette. He discussed and wrote letters to her,
regarding Tashi. Adam’s visits and his friendship are disliked by Tashi. She purposely avoids Lisette during her visits to California. Tashi tries to kill herself and her son when she learns that Lisette is carrying Adam’s baby, Pierre. She drives Pierre out, pelting stones at him, when Pierre arrives in America to meet his father Adam. But, later she realises her mistake stops hating him and accepts him. Tashi admires Pierre for his knowledge and marvels at his explanations:

Pierre has been such a gift to me. You would be proud of him. He has promised to continue to look after Benny when I am gone. Already he has taught him more than any of his teachers ever thought he could learn. I wish you could see Pierre — and perhaps you can, through one of the windows of heaven that looks exactly like a blade of grass, or a rose, or a grain of wheat — as he continues to untangle the threads of mystery that kept me enmeshed. (260-261)

Pierre unravels certain facts about the dark tower which was haunting Tashi in her dreams. He explains to her about the termite hill and helps her shed her fears. He tells her that many African houses resembled those of termites. It was termites who taught early humans about natural air-conditioning with their long vaulted passageways and great domed storage rooms. Over a period of time the Africans developed a strong identification with the termites. Their religious symbology became completely reflective of termite behaviour. Pierre tells Tashi:

This, Madame Johnson, is your dark tower. You are the queen who loses her wings. It is you lying in the dark with millions of worker termites -- who are busy, by the way, maintaining mushroom farms from which they feed you -- buzzing about. You being stuffed with food at one end -- a boring diet of mushrooms -- and having your eggs, millions of them, constantly removed at the other. You who are fat, greasy, the color as you have said of tobacco spit, inert; only a tube through which
generations of visionless offspring pass, their blindness perhaps made up for by their incessant if mindless activity, which never stops, day or night. You who endure all this, only at the end to die, and be devoured by those to whom you’ve given birth. (216-217)

Tashi grows so fond of Pierre that she writes to Lisette after her death saying that “It is that you are in the land of death that makes friendship with you so appealing” (258).

Evelyn learns from an article in Newsweek that M’Lissa was still alive and has become a national monument. She had been honoured and revered by the Olinka government for her role during the wars of liberation when she had acted as a nurse as devoted to her charge as Florence Nightingale. Her unfailing adherence to the ancient customs and traditions of the Olinka state has also won her great appreciation. She is shifted from her obscure hut where she lay dying on a filthy straw mat and brought to a spacious cottage on the outskirts of a nearby town where she would be within easy access to a hospital, should the need arise. After having been shifted into the sunlight of her new home, a remarkable change happens to M’Lissa. She has stopped showing signs of death, stopped ageing, and begun to blossom. She has begun to “youthen,” being attended by a local nurse, a geriatrics specialist, a cook, and a gardener.

Tashi-Evelyn, now full of awareness that circumcision is the source of her own madness, devises a plan to mutilate M’Lissa as she had mutilated her. Tashi visits M’Lissa pretending to serve her. She goes to M’Lissa as a daughter goes to a mother. Tashi pretends to love her immensely. She sends away Mbati,
the girl who was looking after M’Lissa, saying that M’Lissa’s other daughter has come from America just to look after her. Since coming back to care for the elderly was such a strong characteristic of the ancient traditions, no objection was raised and M’Lissa was too happy to have her by her side. Tashi decides to take revenge on M’Lissa who had been the cause of all her suffering. She blames M’Lissa for her state of life and deceitfully plans to kill her. Day after day Tashi swears to mutilate the wrinkled body of M’Lissa so much that her own god would not recognize her. She keeps fingering the razors kept secretly stuffed under her pillow and fantasizes M’Lissa’s bloody demise:

Each night I fingered the razors I kept concealed in the stuffing of my pillow, fantasizing her bloody demise. I swore I would mutilate her wrinkled body so much her own God wouldn’t recognize her. I smiled to think of her nose lying bloody on the bed. But each morning, like the storyteller Scheherazade, M’Lissa told me another version of reality of which I had not heard. (195-195)

Although Tashi was not much interested in the life of M’Lissa, she keeps up with her patiently. Trapped, she listens to M’Lissa: “SINCE THE PEOPLE of Olinka became a people there has always been a tsunga. It was hereditary, like the priests. Before the people became a tribe they lived too ... , from the time of memory, always, in my family, the women were tsungas” (204). M’Lissa, the tsunga who had circumcised many girls and inflicted pain on them, was also a victim of the barbaric practice. Since a very long time the women in M’Lissa’s family were the tsungas. One day M’Lissa’s mother had to circumcise girls of M’Lissa’s age. She could not bear to do it to her own daughter. When M’Lissa’s turn came, she tried to get away cutting lightly. But M’Lissa was not spared.
What her mother started was finished by the witchdoctor. In fright M'Lissa's body bucked under the razor sharp stone he was cutting with and there formed a deep gash which travelled right through her right thigh. M'Lissa sadly remarks that it was a mark on her body of her own mother's disobedience. M'Lissa tells Tashi, "I could never again see myself, for the child that finally rose from the mat three months later, and dragged herself out of the initiation hut and finally home, was not the child who had been taken there. I was never to see that child again" (206).

M'Lissa's lower part had been damaged so badly that she could not walk properly. She had to drag her foot. She was permanently deformed in the name of the traditional practice. M'Lissa tells Tashi, "I have never cried after that, ... I knew in the moment when the pain was greatest, when it reached a crescendo, as when a loud metal drum is struck with a corresponding metal stick, that there is no God known to man who cares about children or about women. And that the God of woman is autonomy" (207).

M'Lissa reveals the truth to Tashi. She tells Tashi that Tashi was the biggest fool for having undergone the process. M'Lissa feels bitter about her tradition. She tells Tashi, "Even the sweetest mango in my mouth is bitter to me. ... women are too cowardly to look behind a smiling face. A man smiles and tells them they will look beautiful weeping, and they send for the knife" (228). Walker brings out the true feelings of M'Lissa who had served as a representative of Olinkan culture and tradition. M'Lissa herself being a tsunga sneers at women who inflict pain on their bodies just for the sake of their men.
But since she was born in the *tsunga* family, she had to continue the ritual which was part of their tradition. M’Lissa remembers having left a girl bleeding on the floor in the initiation hut. The girl was crying, feeling so betrayed by every one. M’Lissa says she could not think about her anymore. So she walked away, limped away, and just left her there. M’Lissa says she still hears her crying. The little girl has been crying since she left. M’Lissa feels the pain, the torture, but is forced to observe the tribal traditional values. She says, “In service to tradition, to what makes us a people. In service to the country and what makes us who we are. But who are we but torturers of children” (210).

M’Lissa senses Tashi’s ideas of taking revenge on her. The very first day she meets Tashi, M’Lissa could see her death in Tashi’s eyes as clearly as if she was looking in a mirror. “I KNOW WHAT young people can’t even imagine or guess. That when one has seen too much of life, one understands it is a good think to die. The very first day she came I could see my death in Tashi’s eyes, as clearly as if I were looking into a mirror. Those eyes that are the eyes of a madwoman. Can she really think I have not seen madness and murderers before?” (197). M’Lissa used to be in touch with the mad people living in ramshackled huts when she was a girl. She had learned not to fear them for she knew how to divert their attention. Although they were murderous at heart, they could easily be distracted. Now she diverts Tashi’s attention by posing some questions to her. She knew Tashi had come to kill her. She tells Tashi, “it was only the murder of the *tsunga*, the circumciser, by one of those whom she has circumcised that proves her (circumciser’s) value to her tribe.” “Her own
death”, she declares, “had been ordained. It would elevate her to the position of saint” (196). M’Lissa’s confession or in fact a lie, keeps Tashi’s attempts at bay. She hesitates to kill M’Lissa for sometime. Tashi, listening to the sad stories of M’Lissa, dismisses the idea of slashing her with the razors she had brought to kill her. Instead she kills M’Lissa by placing a pillow over her face and laying across it for an hour.

Tashi reveals her deceitful actions to Olivia saying she has followed the tradition and carried out what was expected of her. It was traditional for a well-appreciated tsunga to be murdered by someone she circumcised. Tashi feels amused at the traditional society which dealt so cleverly with its appreciation of the tsunga and its hatred of her. But the fact is that tsunga was to the traditional elders merely a witch they could control, an extension of their own dominating power. Tashi feels that she has done the right thing by putting an end to M’Lissa. She realizes that the little girls are dying and the women too are infected by the “unwashed, unsterilized sharp stones, tin tops, bits of glass, rusty razors and grungy knives used by the tsunga. Who might mutilate twenty children without cleaning her instrument” (235).

Tashi even goes to the extent of attempting to reveal her pain and agony in the church during the sermon. She expresses herself saying, “I knew I wanted my own suffering, the suffering of women and little girls, still cringing before the overpowering might and weapons of the torturers, to be the subject of a sermon. Was woman herself not the tree of life? And was she not crucified? Not in some age no one even remembers, but right now, daily, in many lands on
“earth?” (259). Tashi feels happy and tells Olivia that M’Lissa died under her own power which even at the end was considerable. She seemed to get stronger, rather than weaker, with age. Hers was an evil power, barely acquainted, any longer with good. Tashi feels that she is not guilty of killing M’Lissa. She in turn wants to convey that women are cowards and they don’t need to be reminded that they are cowards.

Tashi’s suffering is a continuum of pain and what was done to her was not something singular and absolute. She is sentenced and put under trial for killing M’Lissa. Adam tries to defend his wife saying that Tashi was only hurt physically and psychologically but not insane. He describes her as a tortured woman, someone whose whole life was destroyed by the enactment of a ritual upon her body which she had not been equipped to understand. He keeps repeating: “My wife is hurt. Wounded. Broken. Not mad” (157). Adam pleads with the Jury to understand Tashi. But they would not listen to his pleadings. Instead they hiss at him saying, “Mother Lissa was a monument! Your wife has murdered a monument. The Grandmother of the race!” (153).

Tashi is convicted of the murder and put in prison. While in prison Mbati reads out a passage from a book of a white colonialist author. It says that black people possess the secret of joy which is why they can survive the suffering and humiliation inflicted upon them. Mbati promises to find out and reveal to Tashi the definitive secret of joy before she dies. Tashi is ordered to be hanged to death. She refuses to be blindfolded during her execution so that she can see far in all directions and concentrate on the beauty of one blue hill in the distance.
She says that for her that moment will be eternity. Thus Walker characterises Tashi-Evelyn as a martyr and draws our attention to the cause. Before Tashi-Evelyn is hanged, Mbati unfurls a banner which answers Tashi’s doubt. It says, “RESISTANCE IS THE SECRET OF JOY” (264).

Walker reveals that, “Like The Temple of My Familiar, it is a return to the original world of The Color Purple only to pick up those characters and events that refused to leave my mind. Or my spirit. Tashi, who appears briefly in The Color Purple and again in The Temple of My Familiar, stayed with me, uncommonly tenacious, through the writing of both books, and led me finally to conclude she needed, and deserved, a book of her own” (267). And thus Walker was able to create a novel exclusively for Tashi, the entire story revolving round Tashi-Evelyn.

Tashi’s character was introduced for the first time in Walker’s novel, The Color Purple, through Nettie’s letters to Celie. Nettie, while giving an elaborate and detailed description of the customs, traditions and living conditions of the Olinka people, writes about Tashi. Tashi is an Olinkan girl who becomes a close friend of Olivia. “Right after her mother’s death, Olivia got her friend; she and Tashi tend to each other is my guess.”! Nettie writes to Celie about the facial scarification ceremony which is performed as a ritual among the Olinkas. These people try to carve their identification into their children’s faces. Although the children resist their actions, carving is done by force. Tashi also undergoes facial scarification. Later Nettie writes that Tashi and her mother have run away to join the Mbeles. Adam and Olivia love Tashi
so much that they miss her a lot. Adam in love with Tashi goes in search of her. It is his search for Tashi that is elaborately narrated in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. Adam’s bringing back Tashi from the Mbele’s camp and marrying her is briefly related in Nettie’s letters. In order to assure his love for her, Adam too undergoes facial scarification.

Walker’s obsession with Tashi’s character makes her bring her back again in her next novel, *The Temple of My Familiar*. Tashi is touched upon in the childhood memories of Olivia. Olivia, reminiscing on her past, tells Lance, “There was nothing we did not share, and I loved own better than I would have loved my own sister; as much, or more, than I loved my brother, Adam, who,... became Tashi’s confidant, then her suitor, then, many years later, her husband. For it was in that year that Tashi became more my brother’s companion than mine.”12 Olivia also reveals that it was Tashi again who offered help to raise her child, Fanny, along with her own.

The entire novel *Possessing the Secret of Joy* is the summing up of the incidents narrated by the characters. Each character narrates his or her part which makes up the whole story. The novel is not marked by separate chapters as such but are titled after the names of characters. The narrative strands work on different levels and form a complex structure. The personal histories of Olivia, Adam, Lisette, Pierre, and M’Lissa are interspersed with the past and present of Tashi’s life. Each character’s narrative gives a different and additional picture of the story thereby enabling the reader to view the novel from a different perspective. The story of the novel occasionally seem to jump back and forth
in time. Tashi's present is interwoven with her past. Often Tashi unfolds her story in frequent flashbacks. The court scenes and the scenes of Tashi confronting her Doctor bring back memories of her past. The incidents related to Adam, Tashi and Olivia, which are briefly touched upon in *The Color Purple* are elaborated now. Walker, speaking about the continuity of her characters in all her three novels, states that:

Though obviously connected, *Possessing the Secret of Joy* is not a sequel to either *The Color Purple* or *The Temple of My Familiar*. Because it is not, I have claimed the storyteller's prerogative to recast or slightly change events alluded to or described in the earlier books, in order to emphasize and enhance the meanings of the present tale. (266-267)

Tashi, though dead, has been saved. And because she is dead, others like her will be saved. Walker speaks on the behalf of those African women who have not yet seen light. She hopes to enlighten people through this novel. She says a portion of the loyalties from her book will be used 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 practised.
REFERENCES


8. A passage from *The Color Purple* (244-245) is given as a preface to this novel.


