

Possessing the Secret of Joy Short Guide

Possessing the Secret of Joy by Alice Walker

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Characters

Walker's central character is patterned after the archetypal hero on a hero's journey. Tashi leaves civilization, tracks her tribe's warriors into the jungle where she undergoes a rite of passage. One self dies (her childhood) and she is reborn (marriageable). The transformation, however, is a false one for Tashi who is reborn but not empowered. In fact, she is enslaved. She falls into a slough of despond. But with spiritual guides, Mzee, Raye, and Pierre, she undergoes a period of reeducation and preparation. She transforms again, this time into a knight of sorts who slays the dragon — M'Lissa — in an act of self-sacrifice to rally the oppressed against the oppressive Olinka male patriarchy.

Though Tashi may be easily identifiable as the archetypal hero on a journey, she is stretched in so many ways that she is barely recognizable as one individual character. She is a much different character after her circumcision — passive where she was once impish, as Olivia says. After therapy, she is confident and purposeful, where she was once depressed and suicidal.

The numerous transformations make it difficult to see her as a unified character. Also the views of her, coming as they do from various other characters, do not present much of a unified picture of a character either. Olivia remembers Tashi as a sad, wounded child; whereas Adam remembers her only as laughing and cheerful. He says, "Sometimes I think Olivia and I remember two entirely different people."

The jumbled time sequence further complicates any unified view of Tashi's character, as does the fact that her voice is relatively indistinct from her other selves — Evelyn, Tashi-Evelyn, Evelyn-Tashi, Mrs. Johnson, and Tashi Evelyn Johnson Soul. Indeed, her voice is indistinct as well from several of the other characters, as critics have pointed out. It is as though Walker's technique works for presenting a mythic hero but not a flesh-and-blood character.

All the other characters in the novel serve supporting roles to illuminate Tashi. Her husband Adam, by contrast, is a consistent, dull character. In youth, he follows Tashi's lead in sex; in marriage, he follows her ritual scarring; in age, he follows her back to Africa where she returns for her revenge. He is not perceptive. He fails to see her early unhappiness. He fails to see the "psychological circumcision," as Raye calls it, that he may have imposed on Tashi by his liaison with his mistress, Lisette. He disappoints his wife by refusing to preach her cause from the pulpit, saying he would be ashamed to mention something so private. He is like most of the men in Walker's novels where the good men are not strong, and the strong men are not good.

Olivia and Lisette support Tashi despite her rejection of them both throughout most of the novel. Olivia is as selfless a character as her aunt Nettie in *The Color Purple* (1982). She tries 3311 to stop the headstrong Tashi from riding away to undergo the circumcision rite. Tashi rejects her help until Tashi learns the value of sisterhood.



Lisette also has Tashi's best interests in mind but has to offer her aid covertly, and where Tashi senses it, she spurns it. Tashi is not able to acknowledge her debt to Lisette until after Lisette has died and Tashi realizes Lisette was not a competitor but a sister in the struggle.

M'Lissa is the only character in the novel not solicitous about Tashi's welfare. She has experienced and seen too much pain perhaps to be overly concerned with Tashi, who she criticizes as too self-concerned. As collaborator and crusader, the two characters embody different responses to oppression. As adversaries they are alike in many ways, as adversaries often are. They both have undergone the ritual, both are storytellers, as if compelled to tell their stories to justify their lives. Both are drawn to martyrdom, and both blame others for their misery. M'Lissa blames the victims (including Tashi and her mother) for their witless complicity. Tashi blames M'Lissa. And neither will allow herself to see the other's point, although both betray hints of sympathizing with the other.

As a character, M'Lissa is one of Walker's most intriguing creations. She runs counter to the novel's thesis — her life is a rejection of sisterhood. Yet her stoic suffering, her perceptiveness and her will to survive, make her a strangely sympathetic character.

Social Concerns

Few novelists are as actively concerned with addressing social issues as Alice Walker. With *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, she exposes the practice of female circumcision or "genital mutilation" — a practice that ranges from ritually nicking the clitoris to excising the entire vulva and sewing up all but a small opening of the genitals. In the book's epilogue, Walker says that this practice has scarred as many as 100 million women and girls in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East.

To continue resisting this tradition, Walker has set aside a portion of the book's royalties 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."

The central character, Tashi, in order to connect with her people's threatened cultural traditions, chooses to undergo the severe form of the ritual which the Olinka practice. Rather than finding connection, however, she discovers that she is robbed of her graceful physical mobility, sexual pleasure, the possibility of normal childbirth, and her mental stability. And if that is not enough, she finds that the rite serves the function of preserving male dominance by ensuring female fidelity, and docility, while ensuring male property rights and increased sexual pleasure. It becomes Tashi's mission to kill her tribe's honored tsunga — the woman who mutilated her and caused her sister's death. In so doing, she becomes the focus of resistance to the tradition's continuation.

Walker makes peripheral comments about inadequate Olinka governmental response to the AIDS epidemic and American-sponsored cruelty in the treatment of AIDS research monkeys.

Her expose of female circumcision, however, so dominates this novel that the many social concerns which appear in her other novels do not arise here.



Techniques

Possessing the Secret of Joy is a collection of first-person narratives which tell the story of the effect a female circumcision ritual has on the central character's life, the lives of her family members, friends, and as Walker in her epilogue says, "on the whole society in which it is practiced, and the world."

Walker's choice of this technique seems appropriate to her theme since it illustrates her philosophy that "It is only the cruelty of truth, speaking it, shouting it, that will save us now." In other words, people need to speak out about wrongs, especially about wrongs that have been taboo subjects.

In *The Color Purple*, Walker spoke out about abuse within the African-American family through the epistolary form. Here she uses the oral tradition to discuss the ritualized abuse of women in Africa. It seems especially appropriate to have a variety of voices speak out on a topic that is taboo in an oral culture. And the technique of using multiple narrators allows Walker to dispense with an authorial voice and let characters speak for themselves. It is a way of sharing narrative authority which is important in a novel that argues against the authorities' silencing of marginalized voices.

The first person narratives in this form could also be viewed as interior monologues, and as such, the form allows Walker to show how this ritual affects the lives of people internally.

Her point, after all, is that the ritual's effect is not just on the bodies of women. Its effects are revealed in Adam's agony over his troubled marriage, in Benny's diminished mental capacity, in Lisette's guilt over her affair with sexually frustrated Adam, in Olivia's unhappiness over her difficult friendship with Tashi, and on and on.

These separate narrative voices do not undercut, as one critic implied, each other's view of reality as happens in the classic Japanese film *Rashomon*.

We are not left wondering what is the truth. In *Possessing the Secret of Joy* the characters expand and deepen but do not undercut other speakers' narratives, with one exception: the clash between Tashi and M'Lissa. Their narratives differ so fundamentally on values and the facts that ambiguity and irony begins to seep into what is certainly intended to be a polemical novel.

The exchange of monologues, however, is short and Walker quickly supplants M'Lissa with Tashi as the martyr.

Another technique Walker employs is the arranging of the narratives out of sequence chronologically. By doing so, she keeps the focus of the novel on the impact of key events on characters' lives and not on what is otherwise a rather conventional revenge plot.



Themes

The central themes in *Possessing the Secret of Joy* fit together like a reasoned argument. Established first is a concern central to all of Walker's work: the subjugation of women. In this novel the focus is specifically on how ritualized female circumcision denigrates women's bodies, minds, and spirits.

The cataloguing of circumcision's horrific effects begins with the moving opening scene of Tashi as a young girl crying soundlessly among adults for her dead sister, the victim of a botched mutilation. Because of the powerful taboo against acknowledging the practice, no one shows any emotion or offers to comfort the little girl.

Later, Tashi herself undergoes the ritual to identify with the Olinka people, whose freedom fighters, in throwing off the yoke of imperialism, seek social cohesiveness by encouraging tribal traditions. Tashi finds the ritual serves to strengthen patriarchal power at her heavy expense. Urination takes her three quarters of an hour, her periods are more painful, to her mortification she finds that she smells because of retained menstrual blood, sex with her husband, Adam, is painful and unfulfilling, she has to shuffle when she walks, and because of the narrowed birth canal, she loses one child and the other, Benny, is damaged at birth, resulting in his retardation.

While struggling to hold on to her sanity, during therapy she remembers something that symbolizes her loss and the Olinka patriarchy's gain: her excised flesh fed by the tsunga to roosters.

Tashi's awareness of circumcision's destructive effects on her and her sex comes only after a long period of education — which Walker seems to suggest is an essential first step in dealing with this tragedy. Tashi's fragmented identity can only be rebuilt through self-knowledge with the aid of guides.

Tashi is treated by two psychologists — Mzee, an old, white, male Austrian, and Raye, a middle-aged, black, female American, who together suggest the varied sources of knowledge. Mzee helps Tashi face what she has repressed about her sister's death and her own ordeal. Raye helps her to see clearly the self-serving misinformation about women's roles and bodies given out by the Olinka leadership. With their help, Tashi gets "the boulder" off her tongue so she can begin speaking — testifying, an important theme in itself. After understanding the problem comes telling the story. In a sense this entire novel is a collection of first person narratives because it is a telling — a counter to the taboo of silence concerning female circumcision.

The process of education could not have begun without that which was rejected by Tashi until the end of the novel — sisterhood, another important theme in the novel. The novel opens with a story told by Tashi about the loss of sisterhood. A female panther that is closed out of a relationship with a mated pair by the jealousy of the other female goes away to die alone.



The novel nears the end with Tashi writing a letter to an already dead rival — her husband's mistress, Lisette. In the letter Tashi, the jealous mate, acknowledges Lisette's sisterhood. Lisette provided Tashi with psychological help through her uncle, Mzee, and son, Pierre.

A theme which concludes the novel is the necessity of the struggle. Women must struggle against this ritual mutilation, Walker seems to be saying.

Understanding the problem of subjugation is not enough and neither is just sympathy for its victims. M'Lissa understands but will not resist. Adam sympathizes but cannot bring himself to preach against the ritual from the pulpit. Olivia sympathizes as well, but is too weak to be told the truth that Tashi committed murder for the cause.

Among the central characters, Tashi alone seems to understand the importance of action — she and the women on the streets who defy the soldiers. In the final chapter, in what is perhaps the weakest part of the novel, all the central characters concerned for Tashi too conveniently discover the necessity of resisting the patriarchy which honors this ritualized mutilation of women.



Key Questions

Several reviewers predicted that *Possessing the Secret of Joy* would stir up controversy. It has not in the United States, probably for the same reason Alice Hall Petry suggests *The Color Purple* did not stir up as much controversy in the rest of society as it did in the African-American community: White society was not in the arena. For the most part, someone else's actions, and not America's own, are up for discussion in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*.

That said, there is still plenty to discuss. The *Lancet*, a British medical journal, notes that female circumcision is only part of a rite young women in Africa go through to become initiated into adulthood. Much positive information is shared at the time of the ritual.

The *Lancet* charges, "By taking circumcision out of its cultural context, Walker has clearly displayed the ethnocentric view of an outsider." An interesting line of discussion could be what rights and what obligations do outsiders have in seeking to change customs, rites, and religious practices of another culture?

1. Does Tashi's opening line "I did not realize for a long time that I was dead" refer to the death of her spirit after the circumcision or was it delivered from beyond the grave?
2. The novel opens with Tashi relating an allegory of a lioness. How is Tashi's life related to the allegory?
3. Why does Walker have Tashi in her youth flaunt tribal custom by making love in the fields where the Olinka grow their crops?
4. There seems to be some confusion in the novel as to whether the excised flesh from the circumcised was fed to hens or roosters. Why was Walker not clearer on this point?
5. What is the relationship between Walker's characters Adam and Evelyn and the biblical first couple?
6. What difference is there, if any, between the sections narrated by Tashi/Evelyn and Evelyn-Tashi?
7. Tashi is treated by two psychologists, Mzee and Raye. What does Raye teach Tashi about herself that Mzee was not able to?
8. In the past, black males have charged Walker with showing a onesided view of them in her work. How do the black male characters in this novel appear?
9. Tashi, who seems to be the value carrier in this novel, commits murder.

Is there any evidence that Walker frowns on her action? Or is she wholeheartedly in support of Tashi?



10. M'Lissa's power as a storyteller threatens to neutralize Tashi's revenge.

Tashi begins to sympathize with M'Lissa. What causes Tashi to go ahead with the murder? Tashi finally decides to smother M'Lissa instead of slicing her up. Does that say anything about the threat M'Lissa poses for her?

Literary Precedents

The unusual narrative technique Walker uses in *Possessing the Secret of Joy* reveals a debt to Faulkner. In *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), three narrators tell the story in internal monologues with no authorial comment and with a jumbled time sequence. An interesting note is that both novels also contain a retarded narrator: Benji in Faulkner's novel and Benny in Walker's. But the novel of Faulkner's that most seems like a precedent to Walker's is *As I Lay Dying* (1930).

Faulkner's novel has a highly segmented narrative. His novel is distinctive in that some narratives are only a line or two long. The famous example is Vardaman's "My mother is a fish."

Some of Walker's narrators speak only a few lines as well. The narratives are not always in chronological order in either novel, and the narratives are not numbered, which further suggests that both novelists are working against a narrative with a straight-line progression. Both novels are centered on one woman's death and its effect on family and community. *Possessing the Secret of Joy* begins with this striking line: "I did not realize for a long time that I was dead." In Faulkner's novel it is Addie who, wedged in among the living narrators, speaks from the dead. Faulkner's narrative techniques in *As I Lay Dying* are so unusual that it is impossible that Walker's work could so clearly reflect them by coincidence. It is not unusual for Walker to look for uncommon narrative methods. *The Color Purple* uses an epistolary form which has a long but infrequent use in literary history.

Almost every reviewer has commented on the novel's narrative technique. One reviewer, Janette Turner Hospital, wishes Walker "had opted for a different literary form, a new kind of polemic rather than a variation on the traditional novel." She thinks a combination of "an episodic collage of documentary fact, scholarly opinion and lyrical monologue" would have been more appropriate. Perhaps, but the traditional novel has served polemical purposes quite well for a long time.

Numerous American novels have dramatized social ills in order to bring the public's attention to problems and Walker's novel is in that tradition.

Witness Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* (1906) or John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939).

Related Titles

The characters Tashi, Olivia, and Adam appear briefly in *The Color Purple* and in *The Temple of My Familiar* (1989).

Possessing the Secret of Joy, however, should not be seen as a sequel, says Walker "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."

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