Hegemony Unbound: Tradition Gone Awry as the Female Body Mimics a Site of Colonization and Decolonization in Alice Walker’s “Possessing the Secret of Joy”

Dr. Samuel Obed Doku
Foreign Author
Howard University
Washington, DC
United States of America

Alice Walker’s novel, Possessing the Secret of Joy shares some similarities with many texts written by black Americans, but it is uniquely different because its settings include an African village where the story begins. The novel is rich in intertextuality as it engages other great American authors like W.E.B. Du Bois, Zora Neale Hurston, William Faulkner, feminist bell hooks; and Austrian psychoanalytical theorist, Carl Jung. Beside its psychoanalytical framework and story-telling pattern with multiple narrators, Possessing the Secret of Joy is also grounded in Louis Althusser’s Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) and Repressive State Apparatuses (RSAs) theories, as well as in Antonio Gramsci’s hegemony theory.¹ These theories exemplify themselves in the way the protagonist in the novel is convinced to succumb to genital mutilation and how a journey into herself to remember long-repressed memories, eventually results in her ability to liberate women of her village. Possessing the Secret of Joy is a modernist novel in which hegemony, patriarchy, and feminism converge to expose an obnoxious practice in an African village in expectations of dismantling the antiquated tradition that informs the novel.

Among its many hermeneutical expositions, Modernism is quintessentially a break away from tradition to find new modes of expression and position antediluvian traditions in the spatial realm of renewal, reconfiguration, and rebirth and in the process, make them new. Modernism does not situate itself in rigid structures that lack dynamism and flexibility. In other words, Modernism attempts to dismantle structures of traditional dogmas and moral certitudes and strives to replace them with intellectual relativism, where intellectual subjectivity intertwines with compassion and individual brilliance to assist society to progress. In Possessing the Secret of Joy, Walker reverses the African American tableau of
story-telling, and for the first time since the tumultuous sixties, she exposed a dated African practice that continued to deprive women in the village of their individual liberties. However, the problem—female genital mutilation—extends far beyond the narrow confines of the African village of Olinka where the story is initially set.

The novel is Walker’s critique of the tradition wherever it was and is practiced. Other hermeneutic linings of Modernism are fragmentation, anarchy, epistemological crisis, and exposure of the naturalistic conditions that contribute to the annihilation of what Antonio Gramsci has labeled the “subaltern” or the marginalized. In Olinka culture, women are marginalized, and to compound the problem of their marginalization, they must conform to institutionalized violence by way of having their genitals mutilated. In an essay on modernism, Mark Sanders points out, “it is through the exchange of experience—heightened and made communal through the aesthetic—that inter-ethnic understanding and cultural integration can take place” (133). Sanders also points out that the cardinal tool of exchange is art, and literature more specifically performs that function. Fyodor Dostoevsky states it more succinctly when he notes that “first, art imitates life; then, life imitates art and through art, life discovers its true meaning” (qtd. In Jonathan Louie.

www.thoughtsonworship.wordpress.com/tag/fyodordostoevsky). This is exactly what Walker does in Possessing the Secret of Joy. During the shooting of a movie in Kenya, Walker came into contact with the practice of female circumcision. Feeling appalled with what she discovered, she decided to expose the practice through the medium of literature. In fact, Walker, like Franz Boas, in deciding to represent the rite of passage of circumcision in Possessing the Secret of Joy, “understood racial differences in behavior, custom, and outlook to be products of different social environments and histories” (Walker 132).

In the protagonist, Tashi, readers see a woman firmly grounded in the tradition of the village as she defends their customs and chastises Blacks in the Diaspora for assimilating Western culture and values. To announce her intention of creating something new, Walker begins the novel thus: “This Book is Dedicated / With Tenderness and Respect / To the Blameless/ Vulva.” If the beginning of the novel is informed by a modernist strand, the setting of the novel, the village of Olinka in Africa by an African American woman, possibly marked the first time of such an undertaking. The fragmented individual is another modernist trope, and Tashi, the protagonist, exhibits elements of a fragmented subjectivity after she gave birth to a retarded son, a birth that had complications because of the shrinkage of her
vulva, the result of the mutilation of her clitoris. Indeed, Tashi’s gamut subjectivity is so tormented by her fragmentation that Walker renders Tashi’s subjectivity in the realm of neurosis. However, through her madness, she is made whole again as she retaliates by killing the witch doctor at Olinka that performs the circumcision.

From this perspective, it is prudential to note that making things new is immanent and intrinsic to the black experience. As has been well documented by historians, in strategic attempts to disfigure and denigrate the history of black people in the new world, the enslaved that were brought to America during the vicious epoch of slavery known as the Middle Passage, were obviated from getting any formal education. Stripped of the original languages they brought from Africa, the enslaved in the new world had to re-create their own ways of communication from mainstream culture. This process of re-creating, re-visioning, and remodeling their old languages and African music has since antebellum America, made the black American a perennial modernist. Consequently, long before Virginia Woolf, Ezra Pound, and the early Modernists decided, in the early part of the twentieth century to invent novel ways of expressing themselves in poetry and in fiction, a Movement that was popularized by Pound’s moniker, “Make it New,” black Americans like Frederick Douglass, Paul Lawrence Dunbar, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Frances Harper had long begun finding new ways of expression in their novels. In this sense, a suggestion can be effectively advanced and intelligently argued that Black Modernism predates mainstream Modernism, so when Walker published Possessing the Secret of Joy, she only added her art to a large corpus of African American modernist writers who had already punched their tickets to fame on the trajectory of Modernism.

In spite of its modernist trope, however, critics view Possessing from a variety of different narrative perspectives. Geneva Cobb Moore analyzes the novel from a psychoanalytic point of view and avers that Walker “explicitly appropriates Carl Jung’s archetypal patterns of the ego, the shadow, the animal/animus, and the Self in a psychological process that promises individual harmony and wholeness for those earnestly seeking self-knowledge and well-being” (111). Alyson R. Buckman substantiates the hegemonic structure grounded in Olinka society and writes, “[T]his text [Possessing the Secret of Joy] functions as an example of revolutionary action against the oppression of those colonized by the imperialistic gaze; the female body and the African body are exposed as sites of colonization by power elites” (90). The Gaze functions like the proverbial Big Brother and fixates its
patriarchal eyes on the women of Olinka, allowing men to control and manipulate life in the village that stifles women’s rights. Men in the Gaze have their own interpretation of women and how they should live their lives. In Olinka, the African leaders exercise their dominant phallic power to control the yonic aspirations of the women. As a result, women must have their genitals mutilated, and they also must have facial markers that seemingly symbolize their courage and bravery.

In Althusser’s “Ideology and Ideology State Apparatuses,” the French philosopher and advocate of Structuralism makes an insightful foray into Marxist theory and presents some useful exegesis of everyday terms as part of his contributions to the study of theory. Althusser’s analysis provides profundity to the semiotics and semantics of Marxist theory, even as it facilitates its application to the interpretation and meaning of literature. In Althusser’s discourse, he gives immanence to the state and describes it as a repressive force that operates at the beck and call of the ruling class. Embedded in the state in order to make it efficient are national functionaries Althusser describes as Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) and Repressive State Apparatuses (RSAs). Althusser argues that ISAs depend on the subtle manipulation of individuals to imbibe and accept certain modes of behavior and ideas as the mores of society. Among these ISAs are religious institutions, educational systems, families, legal institutions, political systems, trade unions, the media, the arts, and sporting organizations. ISAs capitalize on the angst of what Du Bois has described as Double Consciousness, which is the urge to see one’s self through the eyes of others, to determine what constitutes acceptable behavior. Thus, as soon as a child develops cognitive abilities, ISAs set in and begin to operate to mold, hone, and shape the behavior and thought-process of that child. In the case of RSAs, coercion or force as well as domination form the basis of their modus operandi. These can resort to repressive means to execute the wishes of the ruling class. Among these forces of repression are correctional facilities, the Military, the Police, and some legal institutions, including the courts. In addition to Althusser’s ISA and RSA, another useful concept that applies to Possessing is Gramsci’s theory on hegemony, which he describes as the “coordination of the interests of a dominant group with the general interests of other groups and the life of the state as a whole” (qtd. In Hall 423). The quintessential operative in Gramsci’s definition is consensus or ruling by consent. Although these terms are more inclined to politics and the system of governance, they can equally be
applied to the protagonist, Tashi, in the way she develops and evolves in the novel as well as to the village in which the story is initially set.

Temporality (time), spatial realm, and circumstance play crucial roles in transforming Tashi from a cultural advocate to an apotheosis and a liberator. Initially, Tashi buries herself in cultural particularism in which she strongly defends the sanctity of the belief system that informs the tradition of her village, Olinka, but when she comes to America, reality sets in, and Tashi comes to an epiphany where she realizes that cultural relativism leads to ethnocentrism. From that realization, on her return to Olinka, she puts her life at stake to liberate women of her village. Initially, Tashi is antagonistic toward assimilation of Western ideals. As a result, when the story opens, she regards black people in the Diaspora as “lost” because of their seeming assimilation of behaviors that have made them become deracinated and detached from the mother continent. In a conversation with her friend and later, sister-in-law, Olivia, Tashi unleashes her sarcasm about Western values: “You want to change us . . . so that we are like you? And who are you like? Do you even know”? (Walker 23).

When Christianity is hinted, Tashi retorts: “You don’t even know what you’ve lost! And the nerve of you to bring us a God someone chose for you!” (Walker 23). The village of Olinka is firmly rooted in their traditional beliefs of which female circumcision is one of them. The callous and painful practice is a process by which young females of the Olinka village have their clitoris excised, based on an antiquated belief that cutting their clitoris would define their supposedly virtuous womanhood that includes strength, power, chastity, and an ability to give birth to healthy babies. Walker notes that “the other women . . . had all been initiated at the proper age. Either shortly after birth, or at the age of five or six, but certainly by the onset of puberty, ten or eleven” (64). Ironically, after labeling blacks in the Diaspora as “lost” because of their belief and faith in Christianity, Tashi sees her mother, Catherine, converting and becoming a Christian. As a result, she refuses to allow Tashi to be circumcised. Catherine rebuffs a long-standing tradition of her people by refusing to have genital mutilation administered on her daughter because she had lost one of her daughters through circumcision, so she apparently did not want to lose Tashi.

However, later, Tashi is convinced that getting a facial marker, just like the other Olinka women, would signify her strength and prowess in much the same way as having genital circumcision would turn her into a sacred Olinka woman, who would not be disturbed by libidinal transgressions. Female circumcision, the people of Olinka believe, could also
result in a woman absolutely satisfying her husband during sexual intercourse, in addition to giving birth to healthy babies. Tashi also rebels against her mother’s commitment and refusal to have the circumcision performed on her. Walker succinctly captures Tashi’s willingness to have the circumcision: “Now M’Lissa said, with a grimace of justification, it was the grown up daughter who had come to her, wanting the operation because she recognized it as the only remaining definitive stamp of Olinka tradition” (64).

The stamp of ideology can clearly be seen here as playing a remarkable role in Tashi’s decision to have the genital mutilation performed on her, even at a matured age. She has all along entertained the idea that it is through circumcision that she can be in the same league with other Olinka women, women she viewed as “strong, invincible. Completely woman. Completely African. Completely Olinkan . . . terribly bold, terribly revolutionary and free” (Walker 64). Tashi is eventually circumcised, but she soon realizes that her romanticized expectations of life after circumcision were hyperboles, and the realities of circumcision are far worse than she had envisioned. Just like consensus is needed for hegemony to occur, Tashi is consensual in the mutilation of her body part, because she wanted to be part of a large body of women who have had the operation performed on them. However, after her genital mutilation, life is never the same again for Tashi. As Walker avers, “It now took a quarter of an hour for her to pee. Her menstrual periods lasted ten days. She was incapacitated by cramps nearly half the month, cramps caused by the near impossibility of flow passing through so tiny an aperture” (65). Furthermore, not only does Tashi have problems with her menstruation, she also has problems with having sexual intercourse.

The story of Tashi is a complex yarn of a typical African woman who gets married to an African American pastor, Adam. Her traditional beliefs, marriage, and sojourn in the United States give her a multiple identity and, consequently, multiple perspectives from which she tells her story: first as Tashi, then Evelyn, Tashi-Evelyn, Evelyn-Tashi, Tashi-Evelyn-Mrs. Johnson, and ends with Tashi Evelyn Johnson Soul. After Tashi’s marriage, she realizes that she does not enjoy sexual intercourse because her vulva has allegedly become too small. Compounding that problem is the fact that when Tashi gave birth to her baby boy, Benny, he came out retarded because her vulva has become too small for the baby’s head to pass through without any incidents. In the U.S., Tashi realizes the freedom American women enjoy in relation to the blind and inflexible walls of oppression in which women of Olinka are
M'Lissa is the circumcision expert of Olinka, and she performs the genital mutilation in the village, including the ones performed on Dura, Tashi’s sister, and Tashi herself.

Later in the novel, Tashi relapses into a psychological pilgrimage, where she remembers the mutilation performed on Dura that claimed her life and decides to revenge on behalf of her older sister in order to prevent other Olinka girls from becoming fatal victims of M’Lissa’s relentless blade. In a foreshadow, Tashi captures her visit to the office of a psychologist whose description satirizes Carl Jung: “Olivia has brought me here. Not to the father of psychoanalysis, for he has died, a tired, persecuted man. But to one of his sons, whose imitation of him . . . will perhaps cure me” (Walker 11). Tashi projects her Dura’s pain, agony, and suffering on to herself and murders M’Lissa, who ironically was curiously aware that one day, somebody would kill her for performing genital mutilation on Olinka women.

In Possessing the Secret of Joy, the village of Olinka becomes the nation-state in which the women and elders of the village, by consent, allow M’Lissa to perform the genital mutilation on the girls because the elders believe it is the right thing for the girls and their future husbands. M’Lissa, therefore, becomes the agent, the repressive force that performs the mutilation because it is what the ruling class wants. This is hegemony at its best although the women can be accused of being complicit in the pain and torture inflicted on the young girls. Families operate within the realm of ISA in the novel because of the firm conviction they have about the practice and in their young girls that female circumcision is virtuous, and that, every Olinka girl must go through it in order to identify herself with Olinka nobility and feminine guile. The tradition that forms the basis of the belief system of the women becomes the deity or the Subject that guides and manipulates the lives of their subject girls and women; RSA manifests itself in M’Lissa and her blade as she acts on behalf of the dominant group, the elders. Walker describes Olinka in Marxist discourse, and she points out that the border on the Olinka village had become a haven for Olinka refugees, who had fled to join minority black tribes that hated the dominant Olinkans (63). Marxism is about domination and control of the masses.

Although Tashi willingly decides to have the circumcision, she still feels her body is a corporeal entity that belongs to her, and, therefore, nobody has the right to disfigure it. For the disfiguration of her body and that of her sister, Tashi decides to dismantle the systems of hegemony and the ideological and repressive state apparatuses that empower the Subject to
perpetuate its patriarchal authority on subject citizens in the village through M’Lissa, their agent. In the end, Tashi murders M’Lissa, and in spite of the fact that her punishment is to face the electric chair, she is at peace with herself because M’Lissa would not be around to castrate other young women again. Consequently, Tashi becomes Tashi Evelyn Johnson Soul because her disparate identities have merged. Her African tradition embraces Christianity, hence, the name of Evelyn, which fuses with her status as a married woman, symbolized by her marital name of Johnson. The convergence of Evelyn-Tashi-Johnson into one singular soul depicts a woman at peace with herself. As Walker affirms at the end of the novel, “RESISTANCE IS THE SECRET OF JOY” (281). Tashi describes her own execution in figurative terms: “There is a roar as if the world cracked open and I flew inside. I am no more. And satisfied” (281). Tashi is satisfied because the women supported her all the way to the death chamber to indicate a unique female bonding in the novel. She fiercely resists hegemony in the state of Olinka by killing the supreme agent who put women in the closet of “double bind.” To that end, Tashi decides to extricate herself from the oppressive limitations of the state and M’Lissa, by killing her in order to liberate voiceless Olinka women from the horrifying ordeal of female circumcision. It is imperative to note that the practice of female circumcision travels far beyond the peripheries of Olinka, for many countries in Africa and some parts of the globe are equally guilty of subjecting their young women to that dreaded practice. By turning it into a case study in her novel, Walker brought the attention of the West in general, and blacks in the Diaspora in particular, to the antediluvian practice that has outlived its usefulness. By initially refusing to be circumcised and then agreeing to it, Tashi becomes the sacrificial lamb who saves the dignity of African womanhood in the novel.

Published in 1992, the novel seems to be a critic of the ethnic violence and genocide that were the bane of some African countries at the time, including Rwanda. The tribal war between the Mbeles and the Olinkas in the novel symbolized the ethnic violence in other African countries like Liberia, Sierra Leone, and the Republic of Congo. Adam’s comments about the meanness of some Christians is Walker’s way of probably criticizing Christianity, a religion she unfavorably views as the one used largely in enslaving Africans. Crucially though, to blame Christianity for the woes of slavery is to shield and exonerate the abominable slave masters who skewed the faith to satisfy their pernicious and fatalistic desires of disliking people who did not look like them. For, Christianity calls for servants to obey their masters and masters to treat their servants well. As Frederick Douglass points out
in his Bildungsroman, the worse perpetrators of the untoward violence visited on slaves were those who called themselves religious, some of whom were preachers. Consequently, Christianity was not at fault for the predicament of the enslaved; it was bad and atrocious charlatans who paraded themselves as slaveholders and misinterpreted the Bible for their own diabolic machinations.  

Although Possessing is not the first of its kind in terms of its multiple character portrayals from disparate perspectives and narrative conventions, it probably is the first novel of its kind written by an American with an African female protagonist, who matures to resist the oppression imposed on her and other African women by domineering groups. In this sense, Walker’s novel is a rendition of a modern text that also satisfies the requirements of realism.

Possessing the Secret of Joy is viewed by some critics as a protest novel because of its portrayal of primitive life and antiquated customs in a typical African society. Unnerved by the process of genital mutilation during a visit to Africa, Walker decided to capitalize on the power of written discourse to expose the obsolete practice. As Michel Foucault posits in The History of Sexuality, “. . . . Discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy” (qtd. in hooks 284). Critically, Foucault’s mapping of discourse along the trajectory of power, resistance, and ground zero (a starting point) for an antithetical strategy, seemingly, is Walker’s objective in Possessing. Multiple appearances of some of the characters in previous Walker novels is suggestive of the fact that Tashi’s ordeal in Possessing the Secret of Joy does not impact only women of the small Olinka village; it adversely affects women all over the world. The tremendous impact of the novel on other women elsewhere gives it a feminist perspective, for any piece of work by a woman that challenges, even topples dominant male control in patriarchal societies is considered feminist.

Gerri Bates affirms the inherent feminism in Possessing the Secret of Joy: “The novel explores phallic control of women’s lives and the indoctrination of women to make the procedure a tradition, offering no options to unsuspecting young women. Written from a womanist perspective, it shows how one woman musters the strength to stand up and react to a situation . . . .” (115). In a commentary on The Color Purple, hooks asserts that patriarchy in the novel is “exposed and denounced as a social structure supporting and condoning male domination of women, specifically represented as black male domination of black females,
yet it does not influence and control sexual desire and sexual expression” (285). Patriarchy does not control sexual desire and sexual expression in *The Color Purple*, but it clearly does in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. For, the leaders of Olinka, fearful that an uncircumcised woman could become sexually promiscuous and defile her marital bed with adultery, make it incumbent on Olinka women to be circumcised before they are considered noble and virtuous women of their tribe. In the words of Donna Hasty Winchell, Walker’s “women achieve psychological wholeness when they are able to fight oppression; whether its source is white racism, their own black men, or their self-righteous anger, Walker’s overwhelming concern is with the survival of a whole, of a people” (x). Evidently, Walker’s quintessential motive in writing *Possessing the Secret of Joy* is to help liberate women from the painful pangs of female circumcision.

The problem of circumcision is not a continental phenomenon because Africa is a multi-ethnic continent with each country’s mores, norms, practices, and taboos differing from culture to culture. Bates emphasizes the non-monolithic nature of African societies with this observation: “Although within the African continent there are amazing similarities in cultural practices, there are also wide differences both in the agrarian communities and the thriving urban areas. Advantaged Africans who gain access to Western education and knowledge adhere less strictly to time honored practices . . .” (117). This is also an indication of cultural relativism as the internalization of Western culture by Western-educated Africans help them make objective appraisals of practices that have outlived their usefulness and need to be upended. Some Pan-Africanists may view this as a post-colonial assimilation that has resulted in an effacement in many traditional values and beliefs in Africa. However, the stark reality is that a bad practice is a nefarious practice regardless of who antagonizes or supports it. In this sense, Western education helps Africans, who benefit from it to extricate their societies from the antiquated claws of obsolete practices through enlightenment, acknowledgement, and eventually denunciation of an atrocious tradition, it does, indeed, serve the people well. Bates concurs with the powerful political message *Possessing the Secret of Joy* sends to the rest of the world: “Walker’s novel focuses on one aspect of political life, female genital circumcision, which is a primary component of the novel, not just background fodder. This novel has extended political discourse on African customs of tribalism and sexism and the complicity of African leaders, male and female in upholding the rituals of female mutilation as passage into adult life” (119).
The influence of Western education on African societies and cultures spans the length and breadth of the continent. In Kwame Anthony Appiah’s essay, “The Postcolonial and the Postmodern,” he alludes to the prevailing impact of Western education that evenly informs the curricula of indigenous African universities. He notes: “All aspects of contemporary African cultural life including music and some sculpture and painting, even some writing, with which the West is largely not familiar—have been influenced—often powerfully—by the transition of African societies through colonialism . . ..” “Post-colonial intellectuals in Africa, by contrast, are almost entirely dependent for their support on two institutions: the African university—an institution whose intellectual life is overwhelmingly constituted as Western and the Euro-American publisher and reader” (119). Here, Appiah seems to be arguing that post-colonial African intellectuals get their support from America and Europe, so that deprives them of the renegade and maverick spirit required to overturn worn-out, redundant traditions as well as depriving them of originality. While Appiah’s observation may be true to some extent, I argue that enlightenment, whether it is acquired through colonial or postcolonial education, regardless of whether it is embedded in American or European idealism is of good value if it helps in empowering natives to topple or invert abominable practices like female genital mutilation.

The idea of colonialism and its spatial dislocation of Olin ka women from positions of liberation and empowerment is the concern of the protagonist, Tashi. Her body, thus, becomes an instrument of colonization as well as de-colonization. When she allowed M’Lissa to perform the circumcision on her, Tashi’s body became colonized, and M’Lissa became the colonizer. However, after realizing that the reasons behind the circumcision were masked in hyperbolic discourse, Tashi launches a personal revolution to rid the village of Olinka of the oppression to which the women were subjected. To that extent, similar to the Western-educated Africans, whose education provides them with enlightened ideas to tumble obnoxious traditions that have outlived their usefulness, Tashi’s awareness of the repressive nature of her culture only occurs after coming to the United States. While excoriating the village of Olinka for stifling the freedom of their women and practicing sexism through genital mutilation, one must not lose sight of the fact that Tashi initially decides to defend her tradition because of the exploitation being perpetrated by an English rubber manufacturer that precipitated the gradual disintegration of Olinka. To Tashi, the English rubber manufacturer is an exploiter, so by resisting everything he stands for—his culture, his beliefs, and his
habits, it becomes resistance against English acculturation of Olinka. Bates points out that “outsiders whose guiding principle is the profit motive derived from the natural resources available in the village threaten traditional Olinka society because of their insensitive nature and determined motives” (120). Tashi is apprehensive of the exploitation, and as a result, she initially fiercely resists the culture that has embraced the English exploiter in order to “remain receptive to traditional tribal rituals . . . their only identity to Olinka” (120). Tashi’s resistance comes in the form of allowing her clitoris to be mutilated. Several years after the mutilation, Tashi comes to terms with the harsh realities of the circumcision. She undergoes a psychoanalytical treatment under Mzee, who uses a dream sequence to discover that the raison d’être of her pain and torture was the loss of her sister, Dura, to genital mutilation when she was young. At the time, she was simply told that Dura bled to death after the circumcision. Again, Bates notes: “Dura’s death causes Tashi to develop a blood fixation, panicking at the sight of blood” (120).

According to Bates, Walker admits that the writings of Carl Gustav Jung influenced her subjective therapy, which also informed Possessing the Secret of Joy. Unlike Sigmund Freud, Jung focuses on dream sequence as coming from the collective unconscious instead of the repressed unconsciously of individuals as posited by Freud. The collective unconscious then brings about a process Jung identifies as universal symbols of the psyche, observing that all individuals shift their center of gravity from the ego to an integrated human he calls individuation. Because the human has become integrated, he or she develops harmony and is at peace with him or herself as well as the rest of the outside world. The Jungian approach is what Mzee uses in Tashi’s healing process. Indeed, the collective unconscious contains the gamut psychological experience of the human race. In the case of Tashi, her collective unconscious uncovered specific African archetypes important to her cure.

When Possessing the Secret of Joy was first published, some critics praised it as a great work that could help liberate African women living in countries where genital mutilation was still practiced. Others were not too receptive of Walker’s foray into previously uncharted territory by any African American writer and thought she had gone too far by exposing a tradition in which the women themselves believed. The second group of writers felt Walker had undone the romantic idealization of African traditions and cultures that were largely in vogue during the Civil Rights era of the 1960s in which Walker herself featured prominently. The novel sees Walker exposing the circumcision of young girls to advocate for
its discontinuance; it also highlights the then emerging problem of AIDS in Africa at the time. According to Charles R. Larson, “It’s the suffering of children, the wholesale mutilation of little girls that finally haunts us in Walker’s daring novel” (29). Janette Turner Hospital emphasizes the modernist trope of Possessing the Secret of Joy and claims: “The people in Ms. Walker’s book are archetypes rather than characters as we have come to expect them in the 20th century novel, and this is by defiant intention.” Hospital observes that the multiple narrators in the book are not rendered as stream-of-consciousness monologues, nor are they made to belong to distinct individuals. Instead, they are highly stylized, operatic, prophetic—and powerfully poetic” (31).

Double consciousness is another trope that fits Tashi in the novel. In her decision to go for the circumcision after her marriage to Adam, Tashi viewed herself from the perception of the world around her, the Olinka community and decides to be circumcised because she would be seen as a proud embodiment of her culture when she comes to America. This idea of the double is Du Boisian. But Freud also treats the double and gives it the name, “The Uncanny.” The Uncanny to Freud, is the notion where one finds one’s self transitioning between two juxtaposing options that frequently are in conflict with each other. Situations where one is at home, but it is not all that homely, can also be subjected to Uncanny interpretations. Tashi goes through these conflicting emotions in the novel. Furthermore, in The Politics of Black Feminist Thought, Patricia Hill Collins reiterates Maria W. Stewart’s challenge to black women to demystify the negative projections of black womanhood so prevalent during the early part of the 19th century and denounced gender and class oppression because they were at the base of black women’s poverty. According to Collins, Stewart encouraged black women to define their identities on the basis of self-reliance and the spirit of independence. Collins notes: “Stewart was one of the first U.S. Black feminists to champion the utility of Black women’s relationship with one another in providing a community for Black women’s activism and self-determination” (2). Walker, in carrying her activism and intellectual fortitude to the bosom of Africa to liberate women of Olinka, indeed, proves that she accepted Stewart’s challenge to women to fight fiercely against classism, sexism, and gender oppression wherever they are practiced. In the creation of Tashi, Walker imbued her with a revolutionary spirit as a result of which she became the sacrificial heroine of her tribe. But while excoriating Olinka community for allowing its women to be circumcised to reduce their desire for sex, it is important to observe that this idea of
negativity attached to sex dates all the way back to biblical times where sex was mainly viewed as an instrument of procreation. Rubin Gayle points out that “in addition to sexual essentialism, there are, at least, five other ideological formations whose grip on sexual thought is so strong that to fail to discuss them is to remain enmeshed within them. These are sex negativity, the fallacy of misplaced scale, the hierarchical valuation of sex acts, and the domino theory of sexual peril . . .” (11). Gayle also reveals that “Western cultures generally consider sex to be a dangerous, destructive force.” It is these same negative notions about sex that drive the Olinkas to mutilate their women. However, even if their practice dates all the way back to antediluvian times or not, the sheer pain and torture victims of the rite of passage go through render it an anachronistic for the practice to be continued.

Many themes abound in the novel. Themes such as Africa, America, identity formation, feminism, and psychoanalysis dominate in Possessing the Secret of Joy. Of the characters, Adam the pastor, violates the Christian injunction of adultery and has a lover, Lisette, who bears for him another son who responds to the name, Pierre. However, Walker also portrays Adam as a passive observer because when he had an opportunity to excoriate, denounce, and condemn the abominable practice of female mutilation, he calmly refused to do so. In a way, Walker creates Tashi to prove that women do not have to wait for men to lead their struggles against oppressive social structures. Benny, the mentally retarded son Tashi bears with Adam is a stark reminder of the young lives female circumcision destroys. Dura is symbolic of the many young vulnerable girls who lose their lives after undergoing the horrifying practice. Dura’s death is an example to M’Lissa and her ilk that it is wrong to disfigure God’s creation. Walker uses Hartford, a victim of AIDS to throw some light on the origin of the pandemic in Africa. According to Hartford, the spread of the AIDS scourge in Africa was the result of the presence of some whites, whose attempt to use the green monkey in finding a cure for polio, spread contaminated vaccines to sections of the population in Africa.

It is equally important to note that in creating Tashi, a woman scarred by genital mutilation, Walker was perspectival and, suggestively, created a character that bears some resemblance to her own ordeal when she was a child. Walker was blinded in one eye when she was only eight years old. The blinding was a result of a haphazard shot from her brother’s BB gun. Like Joy Hopewell in Flannery O’Connor’s “Good Country People,” who felt she was ugly, after an accidental gun shot when she was ten left her lame in one leg, Walker “felt
her pretty, vivacious childhood self, withdraw and disappear behind a scar that loomed larger in her imagination” after the accident (Preface ix). Walker is not a character or an archetype in her works, but somehow, a nexus of empathy links the author with her protagonist in Possessing the Secret of Joy. Like Walker, Tashi is scarred for life, but unlike Walker who buried her frustration into reading Shakespeare and Russian novelists, Tashi becomes disenchanted with her pain and agony that rendered her into the realm of paranoia, neurosis, and schizophrenia, only to be cured by the Jungian therapy of psychoanalysis.

Possessing the Secret of Joy, therefore, is not a novel with a simple frame of storytelling. In the novel, Walker addresses controversial issues of her day and critiques them in an effort to draw people’s awareness to those problematic issues. From female genital mutilation, psychoanalysis, identity, and AIDS, Walker supplies useful information to her readers in the novel to create awareness of what was happening outside the peripheries of America. From that perspective, she joins the unique category of African American writers like Douglass, Frances Harper, Paul Lawrence Dunbar, W.E.B. Du Bois, Jean Toomer, Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, Sterling Brown, and Toni Morrison, to name just a few, whose works are considered Modern in African American literary canon.

Notes


2. See Antonio Gramsci’s theory of Cultural Hegemony. However, subaltern was first used by Caleb Williams in his fin de siècle novel of the same name published in 1794. He used it to describe junior military officers, and it literally means subordinate. In postcolonial literary discourse, however, subaltern refers to those excluded from the social, political, and economic hierarchy of hegemony, thus, are viewed as the marginalized.

3. See and compare with Oscar Wilde’s anti-mimetic reasoning in “The Decay of Lying—An Observation”, one of the essays in Intentions published in 1891. In it Wilde argues that art offers life beautiful platforms in which it can powerfully express itself; therefore, life imitates art far more than art imitates life.
4. See Althusser supra.


6. See the beginning paragraph of Chapter 10 in the Narrative of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave Written by Himself.

7. See Carl Gustav Jung, Psychological Types, Collected Works, vol. 6, para 757. Here, Jung argues that individuation is a process of transformation in which the personal and collective unconscious are brought into consciousness to be absorbed into the gamut personality. Individuation also has a mollifying healthy impact on the person, both corporeally and viscerally.

8. See Sigmund Freud’s essay, “The Uncanny” 1919. The psychological interpretation of the uncanny is viewed as at once exotically familiar and mystifying. However, Freud found a solution to this dichotomy in his essay. As a result of the Uncanny being simultaneously familiar yet distant, it creates a cognitive dissonance in the individual. The feeling of being attracted and being repulsed seemingly at the same time leads to an immediate rejection of the object.
Works Cited:


