

St. Petersburg Times June 24, 1992

POSSESSING THE SECRET OF JOY

By Alice Walker

Harcourt Brace Jovanovich

Having been both man and woman, Tiresias alone could settle a dispute between Zeus and Hera, king and queen of the gods. Who, they argued, received more pleasure from the act of love? In this myth related—by men—from Hesiod to Ovid, Tiresias doesn't hesitate a moment: the woman, he says, experiences nine times more pleasure than the man. For revealing the secret of feminine sexual joy, Hera blinded Tiresias.

But what can be the secret of joy for the millions of women for whom sex means excruciating agony, sometimes even death, those who have been subjected to pharaonic circumcision? Alice Walker's Tashi, who first appeared in *The Color Purple* and later *The Temple of My Familiar* and is now the central character of Walker's fifth novel, is such a woman.

Born into the African Olinka tribe, Tashi witnessed the ritual mutilation of girls which killed her sister, Dura. Held down by women, the kindergarten-aged girls, with no anesthesia, feel their clitorises, labia majora and minora cut away under the female *tsunga's* knife, often just a sharp stone. In a process called infibulation (from the Latin *fibula* for the large clasp fastened through the genital lips of slave women to prevent intercourse and childbirth), the girls are then sewn up tightly. They will never experience sexual pleasure. Urine and menstrual blood will prove almost impossible to cleanse away. Childbirth will become unthinkable painful. Yet, after childbirth, these women will ask to be sewn up as tightly as before. And as girls they had looked forward to this initiation ritual. It guaranteed their virginity and later their fidelity. It made them feel tight to their husbands, increasing his sexual pleasure and assuring him that the sons he bequeathed his possessions were indeed his. It made the girls desirable as wives.

Practiced for thousands of years, genital mutilation has been performed, according to Walker, on at least 100 million women *now living*. (Marilyn French's recent conservative estimate places the number at 20 million, but Reena Shah, in a St. Petersburg Times article, placed the number at 74 million, primarily in Africa and the Middle East.)

As a little girl, Tashi was "always laughing." A converted Christian, her mother let Tashi escape circumcision in girlhood. But as a young woman, out of loyalty to Olinka custom, the only thing European colonizers had not taken away, Tashi submits to the *tsunga's* knife. Now she could be "accepted as a real woman by the Olinka people." Her American missionary husband, Adam, helplessly and loyally sees the vibrant girl he'd loved grow joyless: "wounded, broken...unquestionably mad."

Tashi's madness leads her into therapy with Carl Jung himself, the great explorer of the mythic level of the unconscious. Adam cultivates a long-term friendship with Jung's niece, Lisette, which results in a son, Pierre. Jung, then Tashi's American psychiatrist Raye, and finally Pierre become the channels through which Tashi comes to understand the mythological justifications for her mutilation and the grief and anger that poison her spirit and can find outlet in nothing less than murder.

When she introduced Tashi in *The Color Purple* in 1982, Walker claims she "was not woman enough" to face the character. Instead, she produced one of the great novels of our time. Without the triumph of voice that Celie provided the earlier book, *Possessing the Secret of Joy* is a weak novel unable to support its polemical weight. Dedicating the book to "the Blameless Vulva" and planning to use royalty money to educate "about the hazardous effects of genital mutilation," Walker seems, in fact, completely indifferent to art here. She has other, at least equally momentous, designs.

Intended solely to instruct, this volume becomes a horrifying revelation and ultimately a quest for societal insight and mental health. Tashi's mutilated body serves Walker as the ultimate metaphor for male domination and a female conviction that no sacrifice is too great if it brings male acceptance. It is, after all, the mothers who hold the girls down and a woman who excises their genitalia. What was done to Tashi, by extension, Jung states was done to us all. Cultures mutilate and enslave, Pierre says, because personalities are fragmented rather than integrated. Once society became patriarchal, Raye adds, domination of women became an article of faith: God made woman subordinate to man.

Walker insists that what is left in the face of this oppression is resistance. Yet, Walker has always found sources of affirmation, and she does even in this most bleak of novels. Resistance becomes a first step that can ultimately lead to feminine autonomy and self-love. Only then will emotional and cultural wholeness become possible. "Where the woman smiles and the child is happy," she says, "the world is at peace."