

## Perspectives Reviews

# POSSESSING THE SECRET OF JOY by alice walker

"Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord.  
For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the Church."  
-Ephesians 5: 21-23, King James Version

"Religion is an elaborate excuse for what man has done to woman."  
-Raye, *Possessing the Secret of Joy*

## BOOK REVIEW

by kathryn  
temple

Alice Walker involves a more obvious political 'agenda' in *Possessing the Secret of Joy* than we have witnessed in her previous novels. She somehow manages, however, to sacrifice none of her story-telling, her poetry, or her smooth power.

She confronts the seemingly unapproachable topic of "bathing," or female genital mutilation—common in countless African tribes—through the character Tashi.

Tashi, a member of the Olinkan tribe, is one of a scarce few female tribe members who had not suffered the "initiation ceremony" of female circumcision as a young girl. As a result she endures teasing from her teenage peers and the isolation of not feeling fully female.

Believing the words of her beloved leader, who insists upon the necessity of the ritual for the tribe's survival, and the words of her mother who insists that everyone knows that the vulva is dirty, Tashi chooses to be initiated into womanhood.

The circumcision is performed in a hut, on a grass mat, without any form of anesthetic. The operating tool of choice was at one time a sharpened stone. Modernization has replaced it with a shard of glass, a flip-top from an old soda can, or scrap metal.

The wound is inflicted to the rhythm of the patient's screams and is sewn tightly, then secured with thorns.

Tashi marries an American and moves to the States where, years later, through Jungian therapy, she begins to recognize and confront her wounds, her anger and her pain.

While Walker makes clear her outrage with the illegitimizing effects of Tashi's physical mutilation, she presents Tashi's struggle on a much broader scale. Tashi represents the metaphorical circumcision of women everywhere.

This story does not just take place in Africa and in the life of Tashi. It takes place in the lives of anyone who has ever been female, or has ever been a part of a group that Walker calls the "pampered oppressed."

Tashi pulls me back to a time in my own life when I was 13 years old and I whittled my five feet and three

inches down to 76 pounds, and delayed visible signs of puberty. I had heard my peers, boys and girls alike, whisper and joke about the girls who developed early. Menstruation was messy and embarrassing. And anyone who had ever

picked up a *Glamour* magazine knew that hips and thighs were simply unacceptable.

Tashi urges me to wonder why women are encouraged to deny and devalue those parts of our-

selves that should be revered as symbols of our creative power?

Why should an American woman learn to hate the natural plumps and curves of her body?

Why should she be taught to paint her face, just as she is taught to walk or taught to read? Why should an Olinkan woman learn that her own sexual pleasure is corrupt and dirty?

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He has mistreated the Earth, as he has women, in an attempt to control that which is mysterious and beyond his power. Olinkan tribesmen recall their religious history; God clips woman's wings because "If left to herself the Queen would fly."

I have always enjoyed discussing books with my father, so when I found he was reading *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, I was eager to engage him in conversation. He responded to my proddings with a disgusted, contorted expression and "Well, I wouldn't say that this is the kind of book one 'loves'."

He seemed so disturbed by the reality of female circumcision, that he turned his head away in disgust rather than recognizing the universality of the problem, and the metaphorically 'circumcised' women that even he knows.

I am reminded of a painting that Pablo Picasso created in response to the dictator Franco's barbaric bombing of his own people. The scene that Picasso chose to depict was so disturbing and bloody that he painted it in black and white; this way people would be forced to see the horror without being tempted to turn their faces away.

Well, Alice Walker definitely writes in color.

I encourage you, woman or man, to read this book. Female circumcision of any kind is difficult to confront, but this book is equally difficult to put down.

Kathryn Temple, a sophomore at Guilford College, is in Guadalajara, Mexico this semester.

