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Archetypal Symbolism in Alice Walker's *Possessing the Secret of Joy* by Geneva Cobb Moore

Alice Walker's fifth novel, *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992), marks a new beginning for an author/activist who explicitly appropriates Carl Jung's archetypal patterns of the ego, the shadow, the anima/animus, and the Self in a psychological process that promises individual harmony and wholeness for those earnestly seeking self-knowledge and well-being. It is worth noting that at the beginning of her writing career, Walker embraced the national ethos of protest, resistance, and liberation that defined the revolutionary 1960s, and her involvement in the Civil Rights Movement, especially in the segregated South, was a sign of her profound commitment to changing society and to being a viable part of the struggle for African American liberation and women's freedom from the exterior forces of oppression. With the political assassinations of the 1960s, however, Walker, as made clear in *Meridian* (1976), experienced the pathos of a somewhat successful but now aborted movement. Significantly, then, Walker shifted her authorial emphasis from the external conditions of society to the internal psychological development of the individual, and in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, she turned specifically to Carl Jung, who has written extensively about the individuation process with its aims of bringing the questing individual to a state of spiritual maturity and peace.

Carl Jung's well-documented break with Sigmund Freud occurred because of Jung's inability and unwillingness to accept Freud's restricted view of the libido as the sexual drive of fulfillment. Believing that the libido, or the urge towards life, extended beyond mere sexuality to a

hypothetical *elan vital*, or life energy itself, Jung stressed a widened consciousness whereby the individual seeks to reconcile the opposites of his or her nature that dwell in the conscious as well as the personal and collective unconscious. Jung defines the conscious as the center of the ego; the personal unconscious as a repository of repressed personal experiences or complexes that must be made conscious; and the collective unconscious as an archive of symbolic archetypes of a hereditary nature. These archetypes, which can express themselves in one's dreams, fantasies, and actions, must be made conscious also; that is, these archetypal patterns must be integrated into the world of the ego, which is then forced to acknowledge that the ego-centered consciousness is not really self-sufficient and does not exist independently and alone but is "guided by an integrating factor" not of its own making (Campbell 229).

Jung identifies these archetypes as the persona or mask, or the false wrappings of the society acquired by the individual; the shadow, or the dark side of the duality, like a Mr. Hyde within Dr. Jekyll; the anima/animus, or maternal Eros, or feminine spirit, in the man and the paternal Logos, or masculine soul, in the woman; and, finally, the Self, or the essence of human wholeness, the individual par excellence. These archetypal symbols can be experienced through the individuation process, or the path to wholeness. The individual who endures considerable struggle in this process is awarded the Self, the inner sacredness and uniqueness of the individual who finds the god within his or her Self. For Jung, the individuation process has a religious function, whether or not one is a believer, for there is no creed to be espoused, but rather a belief in each individual's uniqueness. Crystallizing the preciousness of the Self, the religiosity of the process is symbolized by the Self's feelings of harmony and peace and by such objects as the mandala, or magical circle of being, and the philosopher's stone.

Possessing the Secret of Joy is most clearly Jungian, for even in the afterword of the book, Walker acknowledges reading Jung in her own "self-therapy" (287). Her reliance on Jungian archetypes is obvious throughout the novel, which critically examines and interrogates the African tradition of female "genital mutilation." If "individuation" means the becoming of a homogeneous being, then the process of becoming begins with a psychic trauma or wounding of the spirit which is what Tashi, Walker's African heroine, experiences. This traumatic event alerts Tashi to the limitations of the ego-centered consciousness, which is incapable of resolving emotional conflicts on its own, and to the profound but unconscious supra-personal forces interfering in a creative and positive way with the ego, for the ego is

“by definition, subordinate to the Self and is related to it like a part to the whole” (Jung 5). According to Jung, mental crisis has “a long unconscious history,” and one’s inability to resolve the conflict between the ego-centered world of the self and the personal and collective unconscious (manifested by archetypal symbols) evokes the crisis. While Tashi experiences the individuation journey to wholeness, Walker gives specific voice to the inner power of the individual to change and to mature spiritually, a Jungian psychoanalytical discourse that enables Walker to acknowledge yet downplay the power of society over the individual.

In her artistic proclivity to strip and reduce an object or character to what in fact is an awakening truth or epiphany, Walker strips Africa of the romantic image bestowed upon it by black writers in the 1960s and the Harlem Renaissance artists of the 1920s. *Possessing the Secret of Joy* is a contemporary and radical feminist rebuke of a tribal god who “liked it tight” (238) and ancient and modern African leaders who kept their “penis” (244) while African females lost their vulva. This novel is, too, a political diatribe against the social diseases of tribalism and sexism. Tashi, the wounded African heroine, learns by degrees that “White is not the culprit this time” (106), eventually discovering that African tribalism and sexism are responsible for her psychological maiming and subsequent crises. With her dilemma consisting of her renouncing the egoism, the false pride of African tribalism, and her discovering a unique inner voice, Tashi creates an alter-ego in the imaginary Lara, the rejected co-wife in one of her stories. Tashi’s complex about the sight of blood and her repression of archetypal images and their truths are the contributing causes of her mental instability.

Tashi’s wounding begins with the death of her older sister Dura, who bleeds to death from a botched “bath,” a euphemism for female genital circumcision. There are three types of female circumcision: sunna circumcision, referring to the removal of the prepuce or vaginal foreskin; clitoridectomy, referring to the detachment of the clitoris; and infibulation, referring to an excision of both sides of the vulva, which is then scraped raw and sewn together, often in less-than-sanitary conditions. Infibulation leaves only a small opening for the vagina, which can give heightened sexual pleasure to a man during intercourse, but makes urination, menstruation, intercourse, and especially the birth process not only painful but also life-threatening. True to her willful sexual revolt and revolutionary politics, Walker dedicates *Possessing the Secret of Joy* with “Tenderness and Respect to the Blameless Vulva,” choosing for her female characters the most radical form of female circumcision, infibulation.

Surreptitiously, Tashi has gone to the place of the baths in her village, has heard her sister Dura's screams, and has seen the bloody aftermath of the "operation," but she represses the memory of the experience and retains only a phobia of blood. As a result of this repression and her silence, she later submits herself to the African traditions of scarification (a different kind of maiming) and, even later, as a young woman, of infibulation. With an inflated ego, she informs an objecting Olivia (Celie's daughter from *The Color Purple* [1982] who is a missionary in Africa and sister to Adam whom Tashi marries), "All I care about now is the struggle for our people. . . . You are black, but you are not like us. We look at you and your people with pity [for] you barely [possess] your own black skin" (22–23).

When she begins to awaken to the truth about her society, her culture, and the pain inflicted on women, Tashi confesses, "I was crazy," for as she goes to have her face scarred with identifying tribal marks, she sees "potbellied" children "with dying eyes" and "old people" lying on "piles of rags" while the village women make "stew out of bones" (24). Unable to reconcile the impoverishment of her culture with the cultural arrogance she exudes, Tashi develops a "passion for storytelling" and slips into madness. To chronicle Tashi's descent into madness and her resulting fragmentation, Walker creates six personas: Tashi, the troubled African child who submits to the tribal rites of scarification and circumcision and upon whom silence is imposed; Evelyn, the scarred adult Tashi who becomes an American citizen; Tashi-Evelyn, the African American whose cultural duality is dominated by the nightmarish remembrance of her African past; Evelyn-Tashi, the Americanized African whose cultural selves coalesce into a picture of herself as a Wounded American (167); and Tashi-Evelyn-Mrs. Johnson, the aging matriarchal composite of selves who confesses to killing M'Lissa, the mutilator or tsunga (a Walker neologism), who reconciles herself with Lisette, Adam's mistress, and Pierre, Lisette's son by Adam. And, finally, there is Tashi Evelyn Johnson Soul, who achieves the Self upon her reconciliation of opposites, resistance to lies, and acceptance of death for her "crime" of alerting other women to her conviction that resistance to lies (imposed through silence upon suffering women in a patriarchal social order) is the real secret of joy. This pronouncement is Walker's attempt to dispel the myth of racist anthropology, propagated by Mirella Ricciardi in her book *African Saga* (1982), which holds that black people can survive anything, including all their sufferings, because they possess "the secret of joy."

In her typical labyrinthine configuration of text and context, Walker constructs seventy-two narratives of horror: forty-two narratives by the multiple Tashis, and a combined thirty discourses by Olivia, Adam, and Benny, Tashi and Adam's retarded son whose skull is crushed in the birth process; Lisette and Pierre; M'Lissa, the African tsunga; and Mzee or "Uncle Carl," the Jungian analyst. By focusing on Tashi's narratives, we can see the archetypal symbolism and the Jungian patterns of the individuation process. To avoid confusion, all six personas are here called Tashi.

"And what about your dreams?" asks Mzee (25), the Swiss psychoanalyst to whose tower in Switzerland Tashi has been taken for analysis by Olivia and Adam, whose French mistress, Lisette, is a niece to Mzee. By implication, Walker thus espouses Jungian dream symbology. Jung has written of the importance of dreams, averring that there is nothing accidental about dreams which have a "compensatory function" in alerting the conscious mind to disaster or expressing the anticipatory as well as the good and the beautiful. Citing the autonomy of the unconscious realm of dreams, Jung writes that "even when asleep we dream." One therefore "cannot afford to be naive in dealing with dreams" because they "originate in a spirit that is not quite human, but is rather a breath of nature—a spirit of the beautiful and generous as well as the cruel goddess" (Jung 36). By appropriating the dream motif here and placing Tashi in Mzee's "tower" (Carl Jung built his own private tower in Zurich, which he called his place of maturation), Walker brings together the dynamics of Tashi's conscious, personal unconscious, and collected unconscious thoughts—which Jung believed to be essential in the individual's quest for psychological well-being.

Tashi's dream of imprisonment in an African tower that resembles a "termite hill" (239) is symbolic of the personal unconscious as the collective unconscious. Tashi is the Queen termite with the broken wings (239, 232)—reproducing her own kind as scurrying termite workers (who are Africans) care for her needs because she is the sacrificial breeder. Tashi is Everywoman, Walker's cultural trope for African females who experience the bath. However, Tashi does not reveal this particular dream to Mzee, but to Pierre, whom she, as an ego-centered personality, initially rejects. (Her dream will be discussed later.) However, Mzee's showing of a film of his visit to an African village with its ritual ceremony of initiation jars Tashi's repressed memory of Dura's death and eventually causes her to reveal her dream. The showing of the film is deliberate, as deliberate as Mzee's desire to give Tashi "a very large bag of clay" (87), an early reference to clay fertility dolls, symbolic of a magical, strong autoerotic

matriarchal society, which is now denounced by the males for political purposes. Jung often used art in his analysis of patients, believing that art and its creative expressions could unlock the hidden world of dreams in the unconscious. Walker utilizes art in this way in *Possessing the Secret of Joy* and also in *The Temple of My Familiar* (1989), a novel that is not explicitly Jungian but, as a precursor to *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, reveals her Jungian tendency to connect art, psychology, and mental health.

After viewing the film, Tashi draws and paints a foot and fighting cocks, but there is a giant “strutting” cock that waits for the “insignificant and unclean” vulva that the “foot” tosses to it (75). Realizing that the giant cock is really a hen and that the foot belongs to M’Lissa, the tsunga who has operated on Dura and killed her, Tashi recalls her visit to the village bath and acknowledges Dura’s “murder” (83, 116) and the women’s participation in the murder. All is part of Walker’s authorial pronouncement on the hierarchy of oppression with women colluding with men against other women and therefore participating in their own oppression in a patriarchal society. Indeed, later M’Lissa confesses to Tashi that Catherine (their mother) had helped to hold Dura down for the operation that killed her. Through M’Lissa’s voice, Walker perhaps responds to Mzee’s criticism that black women are difficult to analyze because they cannot bring themselves to criticize their “mothers,” a reference to black women’s collusion with the social forces holding them down either through their imposed silence (“don’t tell”) or through more direct methods of collusion with their oppressors. Both cases are presented here. On awakening Tashi confesses, “I felt as if I were seeing the cause of my anxiety for the first time. . . . There was a boulder lodged in my throat. . . . I remembered my sister Dura’s murder . . . exploding the boulder” (83).

The “boulder” explodes further when a retiring Mzee introduces Tashi to Raye, a powerful African American analyst who coaxes Tashi to discuss her own “bath” experiences. Raye is able to bond with Tashi and upset again the silence imposed upon her. She does this by visiting a dentist who performs periodontal surgery on her gums, and the surgery, soreness, and healing of her gums represent, she comments to Tashi, her “puny” effort to comprehend the subject’s emotions—Walker’s apparent reference to Jung’s participation mystique whereby an analyst attempts to feel a client’s pain. With her revelations, Tashi is forced to see the falseness of her masked self as “Completely woman. Completely African. Completely Olinka”—the self-centered and limited, petty world of the ego. Tashi then confesses to having had an “outlandish outsized image of myself” (64, 22).

Having presented and given voice to the first of Jung's archetypal patterns, the persona or mask, Walker deftly describes the second, the shadow, which is superimposed upon Tashi and manifested in her aberrant behavior. The shadow personality is childish and awkward, though not malevolent unless it becomes integrated into the anima or animus archetype, which is more forceful than the shadow because it is convinced of its "rightness." Walker writes of Tashi's shadows, illustrating the archetypal images on several occasions. For example, years after she marries Adam and relocates to America as a "wounded American," an adult Tashi returns to Africa to seek vengeance on M'Lissa, whom she confronts:

A proper woman must be cut and sewn to fit only her husband, whose pleasure depends on an opening it might take months, even years to enlarge. Men love and enjoy the struggle, you said. For the woman. . . . But you never said anything about the woman, did you M'Lissa? . . . I am weeping now, myself. For myself. For Adam. For our son. For the daughter I was forced to abort. There is caesarean section, you know, the aborting doctor had said. But I knew I could not bear being held down and cut open. The thought of it had sent me reeling off into the shadows of my mind; where I'd hidden out for months. (224)

The victims of her shadowy self are Benny, her son, and Pierre, Adam's son by Lisette. She "frequently and with little cause, no cause, boxed Benny's ears," making him "squeal and cringe"; and she hurls stones at Pierre when he comes to visit Adam, while "the cabby ran up to Pierre, grabbed him under the arms and dragged him out of sight" (144-145). Jung states that awareness of the dark and primitive side of the personality is essential for self-knowledge, but this recognition "requires much painstaking work extending over a long period" (Storr 91). Thus, Walker's treatment of her heroine's passion and rage, psychoanalysis and therapy over an extended period of time after which Tashi recognizes and loses her shadow is, it appears, realistic. As Tashi Evelyn Mrs. Johnson, facing execution in Africa, the mature and shadowless Tashi writes to her husband's dead mistress seeking reconciliation and acknowledging that "Pierre has been such a gift to me" (277).

Walker makes considerable use of the black French character, Pierre, who is homosexual. Through his character, the author treats homosexuality as non-aberrant and explores the religious symbolism of stones, Jung's symbol of wholeness. When she finally allows Pierre, a student at

Berkeley, to visit her in California, Tashi muses, "He has told me he likes men as well as he likes women, which seems only natural, he says, since he is the offspring of two sexes as well as of two races. No one is surprised he is biracial; why should they be surprised he is bisexual" (174). Pierre interprets Tashi's dream of imprisonment in a tower that is cool, tall, and dark with "millions of things moving about me in the dark" that are "forcing something in one end of me, and from the other they are busy pulling something out" (26–27). Near the end of her life, Pierre informs her of Africa's "strong identification with the termite" that "has kept a place for males in its society." As the de-sexed (broken wings) queen termite of her dream, Tashi, the prisoner, is "stuffed with food at one end . . . having your eggs, millions of them, constantly removed at the other"; afterwards, she is expected to die (233). In *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, African women are sacrificial breeders in a patriarchal and polygamous tribal society which has made female circumcision a "sacred" or religious rite of passage intended to make a woman fit for marriage: "no man would marry" a "loose" or uncircumcised female whose "clitoris, like a penis, can rise" (235). The village elders believe that God "created the tsunga" and thus it is a religious taboo to break the silence surrounding what Walker presents as a psychic trauma that women have endured for centuries in Africa and the Middle East. In the afterword, Walker cites statistics that indicate that ninety to one hundred million women living today have experienced this torturous rite of passage (283).

A student of anthropology, Pierre has immersed himself in Tashi's dementia, consulting a number of books in order to interpret her dream. Initially rejected, like the biblical Christ, Pierre has become for Tashi the sacred "corner" stone that she once hurled at him. Walker's use of stones is not accidental here or in *The Temple of My Familiar*. The South American character Jesus in the latter believes that by guarding the village's "three small stones" he is preventing the villagers' foreign enslavement. And M'Sukta, in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, is the sole survivor of an African matriarchal tribe. M'Sukta is put on racist display in Condon's "Museum of Natural History," and she is called "the African Rosetta stone" (72, 233). The cover of the novel shows a photograph of "the hand of the author touching Jung's alchemical or philosopher's stone, carved by Jung in 1950" (frontispiece). This stone is cube-shaped and covered with inscriptions; in its center is a tiny replica of a man whose physical encirclement or encapsulation resembles the eye's pupil. Jung had such a stone in his garden in Zurich. In the Middle Ages, the "philosopher's stone" symbolized humankind's ultimate achievement of wholeness: medieval

alchemists had aspired to find “the secret of matter in a pre-scientific way, hoping to find God in it, or at least the working of divine activity,” believing that the philosopher’s stone embodied the secret of this energy (Jung 225). In the individuation process, stones symbolically represent the Self, but Tashi, in Walker’s hierarchical appropriation of Jungian symbolism, must experience the third stage of the individuation process, the anima/animus archetypes.

Presenting what she appears to believe is a natural male/female duality, Walker subverts and exposes traditional Africa’s rejection of this duality and the autonomous rights of pleasure and gratification for women as well as for men. Rhetorically, Walker attacks “primitive” African society and its cultural female rites. Again, it is Pierre, Tashi’s “gift,” who assists Tashi in her development by explaining the concept of the female soul of the male and the male soul of the female. This theory is nullified by Tashi’s society because “Man’s life was not capable of supporting both beings: each person would have to merge himself in the sex for which he appeared to be best fitted” (175)—Walker’s obvious sexual pun and her scathing commentary on the socially constructed and ascribed sexual roles for males and females.*

Walker’s gender-specific language is intended to attack and mock the patriarchal ethos of Tashi’s Olinka society and its political-moral biases which “justify” the suppression of females. Indeed, Walker, typically iconoclastic, is most profane where God, as presented in sacred African tribal lore, has excised an “erect clitoris” that resembled an erect phallus and then “fucked the hole that was left” (234–235). Like her modern literary predecessors — Ann Petry and Paule Marshall immediately come to mind — Walker eschews religious orthodoxy. Here, Raye avers, “Religion is an elaborate excuse for what man has done to women” (235). And in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970), Grange and Ruth, grandfather and granddaughter, “came to church” but “giggle[d] in serious places” (280). Walker does not shun, however, the Jungian idea of the individuation process as containing a sacred, religious function. Thus, her raw and Menckonian

*Because of the growing controversy over genital mutilation, the practice has been banned in many African countries, like Kenya, where fourteen teenagers died from the effect of the operation in 1982. Moreover, protests have come from such groups as the World Health Organization and the International Association of Women Writers. Nevertheless, female rites are practiced clandestinely in Africa, the Middle East, and even in America in places where immigrants settle and maintain traditional customs.

unorthodox treatment of organized religion does not obscure her apparent espousal of the theological divine in the individual. Nevertheless, Tashi, on the journey to the Self, reveals the animus stage of her development when she murders M'Lissa, the tsunga.

Of the male or Logos and rational soul co-existing in the female gender, Jung writes that the "animus corresponds to the paternal Logos just as the anima corresponds to the maternal Eros," even though the female "consciousness is characterized more by the connective quality of Eros than by the discrimination and cognition associated with Logos." This sexist discourse aside, Jung remarks that the anima/animus archetype "is uncommonly strong" (unlike the shadow self which can be discerned and discarded) and is not easily dismissed because it has "an unshakable feeling of rightness and righteousness" (Campbell 155). Under the influence of this archetypal image, one can plunge into the murderous depths of the shadow's "childish" behavior. Tashi has, in fact, the killer instinct of the mythological murderer of women, Bluebeard: she willfully kills the tsunga who has called herself and others like her "torturers of children" (22). But Tashi, unlike Bluebeard, kills to avenge female suffering and to affirm female sexuality, an act which illustrates the dual quality of the anima/animus as possessing "good" or "bad" qualities. Walker vitalizes and validates the Jungian notion of the anima/animus righteousness by having Tashi's multiple selves assume the responsibility for M'Lissa's murder.

For Walker's readers, these multiple confessions can be confusing, but Tashi's act of murder is so "right" in its final appearance that Tashi's multiple selves all claim credit for the feat, which explains the initial confusion of multiple confessions. Dressed like an American, but speaking like an Olinka, Evelyn leaves America to return to Africa to kill M'Lissa and is accused of murdering a "monument" (163). Tashi-Evelyn visits M'Lissa and "fingers" the razors that she has purchased to kill her, "fantasizing" M'Lissa's "bloody demise" (208). But it is Tashi who thinks of leaping up and strangling M'Lissa after listening to the stories of her painful life as a "tsunga" (224). Tashi confesses to Olivia her innocence of M'Lissa's murder; but Tashi-Evelyn-Mrs. Johnson states, "I did it" while on trial, and writes to the deceased Lisette, "Tomorrow morning I will face the firing squad for killing someone who many years ago, killed me" (267, 274). This is, of course, a dizzying discourse; however, it is also an illustration of Jung's conceptualization of the "unshakable feeling of rightness" of the anima/animus archetypes, and, not coincidentally, Walker's subversion of Jung's sexist ideas that "Eros is an expression of their [women's] true nature, while their Logos is often only a regrettable acci-

dent" (Campbell 152). Walker's idea of poetic justice is presented in Tashi's premeditated killing of M'Lissa, who anticipates and even foresees "the murder of the tsunga, the circumciser, by one of those whom she has circumcised" (208).

It is not for M'Lissa's murder, however, that Tashi Evelyn Johnson Soul is executed. Although a tsunga and a "national monument," as a woman M'Lissa is expendable. Tashi dies for breaking the silence surrounding the misery of women's lives in general and their circumcision in particular. Exposing the cruelty of tribal society, Tashi makes signs of protest (an American custom), using the colors of the African flag as Walker merges global traditions and creates a nexus of African American unity. Tashi achieves the Self, Jung's union of opposites par excellence, at the end of the book after she has reconciled the personal and collective unconscious contents of the Self and her relationships with others, particularly Pierre and Lisette. Most notably, Tashi has accepted the truth of her experiences as opposed to the lies of the social order. Resistance to the lies of female suffering brings her the secret of joy, and she, in turn, shares this joy of resistance and truth with other women who attend her execution, bringing ancient fertility dolls, "wild flowers, herbs, seeds, beads," and "ears of corn" in a feminist celebration of women's harvest (193)—the coming of age, the coming of consciousness. Even in the final lines of the novel, Walker's illustration of the Jungian archetypal Self is clear when Tashi Evelyn Johnson Soul faces a firing squad, hears a "roar as if the world cracked open" and is "satisfied" (281).

With this lasting image of her heroine's death and rebirth, Walker links self-renewal to the dynamics of change within the individual, a motif which marks the distance that the author has traveled from an activist committed to changing society to an activist who is devoted to the psychological process of self-healing and the importance of the journey inwards.

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