

Female Genital Mutilation in Perspective: Black Women and the Politics of Feminism

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Abstract

The failure of feminism as conceptualised by the West to accommodate the peculiar experiences of Black/African women, of which female genital mutilation (FGM) is one, has culminated in the production of some Afrocentric strands of feminism which seek to antagonise the universalisation of the experiences of women as conceived by "White Feminism". The efforts of Black women in this regard across the boundaries of location, indicate a vehement rejection of any attempt to force them to accept any foreign imposed "ism" as a gender theory for a whole. Being a signifier of culture, the theoretical framework for deconstructing FGM practices should be located within the milieu of Afrocentric or Afrofriendly feminism. This paper concludes by applauding Third World feminism - an Afrofriendly feminist theory as the most suitable platform for engaging FGM because it recognizes how culture and traditions are instrumental in the oppression of women within national boundaries of Third World space.

Introduction

The practice of female circumcision now popularly known as female genital mutilation (Henceforth to be referred to as FGM) has generated a lot of debate in both literary and critical works. Over the years, the practice has been thrust to the centre of public and academic discourse as it becomes more visible in literary texts. This outcome is not surprising because "prized for its capacity to engender empathic identification, literature has been enlisted in many campaigns" (Levin, 2009:6) and battles as it reflects and refracts the society.

Jomo Kenyatta, the founding father of modern Kenya is one of the first persons to document the practice of FGM in his book, *Facing Mount Kenya* (1965). In the book, which he presents to the British Academy in partial fulfillment of requirements for the award of an advanced degree in Anthropology, Kenyatta illustrates the centrality of circumcision in general to the life of every Gikuyu man and woman. The cultural practice of circumcision stands in the book as a stand post of identity which in turn is crucial to the survival of the Gikuyu society. The outcome of Kenyatta's effort finds anchorage in Stanlie James' (1998:1036) assertion that "culture must

be understood as the language of argument about identity” because culture and identity are like Siamese twins; they are conjoined and interrelated. Almost all the literary texts that explore FGM seem to agree on the role of culture as the foundation on which the practice stands.

In Flora Nwapa’s eponymous novel, *Efuru*, for instance, FGM is treated from the angle of an acceptable and well-received cultural practice of the Ibo people of Nigeria. To Nwapa, FGM is simply a ‘bath’; a kind of compulsory purification rite which precedes a woman’s entry into womanhood and motherhood. Apart from what is considered to be her docile acceptance of a ‘harmful’ and oppressive cultural practice, Nwapa is accused by feminists and anti-FGM writers of maintaining a position of acquiescence (Levin, 2009). It should be stated here that writers like Kenyatta and Nwapa who find themselves supporting FGM practices, only do so as part of an awareness of “their roles as cultural ambassadors in the sensitive context of decolonization” (Bekers, 2009:22).

The Egyptian doctor, author, and activist, Nawal El Sadaawi writes of her personal experience of circumcision, aptly situating the practice within the wider Egyptian context of feminist struggles. In most of her writings especially *Woman At Point Zero* (1983) and *The Circling Song* (1989), El Sadaawi explores FGM through the heart-touching stories of Firdaus and Hamida, both of whom are infibulated (an extreme form of FGM) and repeatedly violated and exploited by the same patriarchal society that expects them to be pure and submissive. Other authors like the Somali duo of Nuruddin Farah and Waris Derie as part of the African diasporic family have equally looked at FGM from an “insider-outsider” perspective. In Farah’s *From a Crooked Rib* and *Sardines* and Derie’s *Desert Children*, the physical and psychological effects of FGM are brought home to the reader through vivid images, with the sole intention of eliciting empathy and rage. Concerning FGM, the duo should know better because of the fact that their ancestral homeland, Somalia and the Somali diasporic communities are notoriously well known for FGM practices. Alice Walker’s novel, *Possessing the Secret of Joy* and a film/documentary, *Warrior Marks: Female Genital Mutilation and the Sexual Blinding of Women*, represent her effort to join the debate on the practice, even though her effort is marred by her messianic posturing and the stringent way she attacks FGM in both works. Despite the plethora of voices on FGM, what is clear is that:

... the authors generally use female genital excision to explore broader socio-cultural issues, such as colonialisation, national repression, misogyny, feminism, or w/human rights (Bekers, 2009:16).

Consequently, since cultural, traditional, and gender issues are at the core of the debate, the divergent views of authors who write on FGM are not totally unexpected or surprising.

FGM: A Cacophony of Theories

Feminism is an ideology cum theory which has evolved over the years as a potent weapon in the battle of women for equality in a world socially constructed to make them inferior to men. Wearing the toga of being a reactionary ideology against male domination, as a theory, it has mutated over the years bringing to the fore as it were, the nuances which point an accusing

finger to its reactionary nature. Since FGM has been slammed as a cultural practice put in place by a patriarchal world order bent on controlling or stifling the sexuality of women in practicing societies, it can easily be entombed within broader spectrum of gender studies.

Consequently, a discourse of any matter relating to gender and culture (at the same time) as FGM is, would necessarily gravitates towards a gender-based theory. To buttress this point, M.K. Asante and A. Mazama (2005: xxxi) aver that “gender is necessarily a factor to be raised in any critical, political, economic, behavioral, or cultural discussion”. But feminism as a theory can be likened to a house with many rooms, as many strands of the theory have emerged over the years, as it mutates in a manner such that the internal contradictions inherent are reinforced.

That the global north is the sacred groove of theory production in academic research work is never in doubt. Virtually all the important theories of scholastic enquiries are sourced from Europe and America. But this reality has been challenged by many scholars from outside this sacred groove, who have argued that not all Eurocentric theories can adequately account for experiences of the totality of human race. For instance, in the case of Feminism, its formation was engineered from the West through the agitation of suffragettes who won for women, the right to vote and be voted for. The history of its birth and the eventual universalization of its gains, would invariably unearth the inadequacies of Feminism as a universal theory which can accommodate the experiences of women across race, class, location and creed. Even in the house of Feminism, battles are raging as this paper seeks to point out.

It is pertinent to question the ability of Feminism as construed by ‘White Women’ to comprehensively account for the experiences of non-white women who suffer the devastating effects of FGM on their sexuality and daily lives. To underscore this complex reality, a careful perusal of Nkiru Ezegwu’s poem, “Sisterhood” would show how controversial feminism has become in the discourse of gender issues. According to the Ezegwu, the call by white feminists to women of other races to come together under one umbrella, to fight off the exploitation of women by a patriarchal world order is a clever ploy to bring these other women together, under the supposed superiority of white feminism. She avers that in the house of feminism, the black woman, who has long been looked down on by her white counterpart is but a second class citizen. The black woman is not deceived as the poem shows:

flicking away tears
of pain from my eyes.
I looked up
from my chore
on the kitchen floor
where, new found sister
had ordered me to be
on knees
to scrub the floor clean
for the pittance she paid:
on knees
to scrub the floor clear
for sisterachy

Ezegwu's poem is a pointer to how African women or women of colour view feminism; that is, as a theory that cannot seriously look after the interest of women other than those with white pigmentation. The poem points that the use of feminism as a theory of criticism has its own inherent problems and drawbacks. These problems have to do with the expansive nature of the theory and the resistance of people outside the white/Caucasian culture to its universal application in the treatment of women oppression, exploitation, domination, and subjugation by a patriarchal world order. Rather than admit the obvious lapses in the universal applicability of feminism to women worldwide, "the standard position of some Western feminists was that all women were natural allies" (Gilliam, 1991:217). As a result, instead of uniting women, feminism serves as a veritable ground for ideological discord and heated controversy. African women and their diasporic sisters have been most stringent in their call for a paradigm shift in feminist discourse. While some have identified with feminism in its totality, others are sitting on the fence of ideological non-alignment; while some others have called for the outright rejection of white-faced feminism. To this latter school of thought, Western feminism only poses to be global while it is overtly racially constructed and culture-specific in practice and reality (Kolawole, 1997).

This perplexing scenario then brings us to the Yoruba concept of *Ona kan o woja*; that is, *many paths lead into the marketplace*. Since feminism has elicited such reactions from many scholars outside the dominant white culture, it has turned to be a marketplace of ideas in the shape of different strands of the theory. Feminism today can be likened to a house with many rooms but with walls thin enough to allow the exchange and cross-fertilization of ideas among its occupants. African scholars and their diasporic colleagues have contributed immensely to evolving different strands of feminism. According to Kolawole (1997:6):

African women have emerged from 'silence' transcending the many limiting borders imposed on them by patriarchal, traditional or post-colonial structures, and have taken positions as the mouthpiece for their gender even from various polar ideological stances. They are dealing with African women's questions in different ways but there is room for each in the collective compound.

By this multi-faceted approach to the issue of feminism, African women in particular are refusing to sing African songs and dance to African music from the belly of the beast. They reject the implication of the imposed "ism" and the universalization of women struggles for self-assertion, self-liberation and self-preservation by insisting that the peculiarity of culture should be recognized in gender theorizing; and they are joined in this effort by other women especially those of African descent in the West. More so, feminism as an ideology is a social construct; therefore, it cannot afford to ignore the legitimate concerns of African women who uphold the centrality of gender, culture, class, race and nationalism in their drive for recognition and acceptance. Johnson-Odim (1991:322) identifies the connection between black sisters across boundaries on this legitimate concern, when she submits that "Black American women, for instance, know they must articulate a feminism which has a clear relationship to the general movement of the black community against oppression"

Afrocentric Feminist Theory: A Cacophony of Voices

The resultant outcome of African women and their diasporic black sisters' push for their own space within the compound of feminism unveils a generous output of Afrocentric strands of feminism. Some of these strands include: Black feminism, Africana Womanism, Womanism, Motherism, Stiwanism and particularly Third World feminism, which on its own, accommodates the experiences of women (African inclusive) who for socio-economic and political reasons are pigeonholed in a geographical space called 'Third World'. However, what all these strands of feminism represent is a conscious and genuine effort by scholars and women of African descent or black consciousness, to refuse to have their voices stifled by a dominant white feminist culture and hegemony. It is also an attempt by these women to locate and possess their own room(s) in the large compound of feminism.

Black Feminism

Sequel to the rejection of any attempt to force them to accept any foreign "ism" as a gender theory for a whole, some black women in America came up with the idea of Black Feminism. One of the major exponents of this strand of feminism is Patricia Hill-Collins. In her thought provoking book, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, Hill-Collins acknowledges that women oppression and domination are not restricted to black women living and working within United States' border, though her concerns does not seem to support this. She opines that "shifting to a global analysis *will* reveal new dimensions of U.S. Black women's experiences in the particular matrix of domination that characterizes U.S. society" (2000:231, emphasis mine). But this opinion clearly reveals to the discerning mind that, Collins portrays the experiences of gender as being universal; a charge already slammed on many Western feminists. By placing "U.S Black women's experiences in the center of analysis without privileging those experiences" (2000:228), Hill-Collins' recognition of the overlapping oppressions of race, class, gender, and sexuality in the bonding of Black women worldwide, falls flat in the face of her failure to mention the place of history and culture, both of which are crucial to the understanding of these experiences. The horrendous history of black slavery, segregation, colonisation and discrimination as well as the cultural nuances of black people, cannot be exclusion from any theory that seeks to pigeonhole black women's experiences. By privileging the experiences of Black American women over other black women, this theory then becomes incompetent in interrogating FGM which is across many African girls and women have to carry.

Africana Womanism

Clenora Hudson-Weems in her book, *Africana Womanism: Reclaiming Ourselves* (1993) would not like us to confuse her ideology on how to rescue the Black woman from the dungeon of oppression with Alice Walker's Womanism. Accordingly, she postulates that, Africana Womanism is:

... a separate and distinct identity for the Africana woman and her movement grounded in African culture, and therefore, it necessarily focuses on the unique experiences, struggles, needs, and desires of Africana women (24).

She finds the term "Black feminism" problematic because it "naturally suggest an alignment with feminism, a concept that has been alien to the plight of Africana women from inception" (19). The term 'Africana' as one is led to believe, accommodates African women and their diasporan sisters. Then, the questions to ask are: to which culture does Hudson-Weems refer? Is it to the culture of Africana women who live and experience oppression within the geographical cultural space or those of African descent who are still fighting for a cultural identity outside the homeland? Quite expectedly, the historical experiences of Africana women discussed in her book are mostly centred on American slavery. Although she argues that there exists gender equality in Africana societies "because in African cosmology...the woman at creation is equal to her male counterpart, which is not the case in European cosmology, which holds that the woman is an appendage (rib) of man" (47), her ideological posturing is hampered by a lack of good grasp of the culturally volatile situation of the Black woman in a world where she contends with patriarchy and racism. Since the African woman's sufferings-like, FGM-are homegrown, Hudson-Weems' theory would not suffice in deconstructing them.

Womanism

It is widely accepted that Alice Walker propounded the theory of womanism. But whether she can lay sole claim to it is another matter entirely because the term was equally thrown up at about the same time she did by another scholar. On this controversy, M.E.M Kolawole (1997:24) submits that though "It is generally believed that Alice Walker brought the word into focus...Chikwenye Okonjo also used the word around the same time." In the "Introduction" to her well-cited collection of non-fiction essays, *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose*, Walker defines a womanist as:

A Black feminist or feminist of color...who loves other women, sexually and or asexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture...sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people [sic], male and female...Womanist is to feminism as purple is to lavender (xii)

Walker's definition is inherently tied to the feelings by Black feminists that their struggles are in tandem with that of their communities against oppression, exploitation and racism. If one is to believe and follow Walker, womanism is firmly anchored in Black culture and is preoccupied with the issue of self-determination for all Black people-both man and woman. In fact, Kolawole (1997:21) holds that:

Her (*Walker's*) definition of womanism addresses the question of racial focus and specificity and makes this concept more valid to African women than the omnibus definition of feminism (emphasis not in the original).

However, it is pertinent to ask: to which culture or people does Walker refer in her definition? Would she be referring to the same culture and people she has so vilified and denigrated in her novel, *Possessing the Secret of Joy* and the follow up book/documentary/film, *Warrior Marks*? Her portrayal of African people and culture in her novel is not better than that of any other Western/Eurocentric feminists/womanists' look at the same phenomenon (Nako, 2001). Therefore her position on womanism becomes quite problematic. Her stance on FGM-a cultural phenomenon-is conditioned by her privileged western status. In fact, Catherine Acholonu, a notable scholar accuses Walker of what I would like to call "the fallacy of transferred image." The fallacy of transferred image occurs when a theorist uses his/her personal image and/or experience(s) to produce a universal concept. Slamming Walker on this, Acholonu (1995:89) charges that:

Walker's definition of womanist is a definition of herself, her strengths and weaknesses, her dos and dongs, her passions and aspiration. It is full of contradictions, abstractions and taboos that leave many women, white or black, on the fence, wondering where they belong.

Accordingly, Walker's postulation is not in any way universal as it fails to account for some issues which are at the core of womanhood such as family, child bearing and rearing, and mothering (Acholonu, 1995). Despite her interventionist attitude on the issue of FGM, Walker's theory is hampered by the question surrounding her sexuality (Is she gay or not?) as well as her ambivalent on the core ideas of family and motherhood on which many African women are not ready yet to compromise.

Stiwanism

Molara Ogundipe-Leslie is a respected African woman scholar not only because she is one of the pioneers in the field of African feminist theorizing, but equally as a result of her prolific contributions to scholarship. She is one of the few African female scholars who believe that feminism-without the imposition of any differentiating prefix-can be employed in addressing the situation of women in African in spite of its Western orientation. Ogundipe-Leslie avoids using the term "feminism" in order to parry the backlash such usage will engender from critics. Instead, she postulates "Stiwanism" which stands for Social Transformation Including Women in Africa. In her book, *Re-Creating Ourselves: African Women & Critical Transformations*, Ogundipe submits that "Stiwanism" is necessary in order to "deflect energies from constantly having to respond to charges of imitating Western feminism" (229). However, the applicability of Ogundipe's ideology is in serious doubt as it caters more for African women scholars than the ordinary women in African towns and villages, who are compelled by such factors as culture and tradition (FGM is an example of this), socio-economic conditioning among others, to bear most, the brunt of patriarchy in its raw, naked form.

Motherism

This theory is Catherine Acholonu's contribution to the quest to have an Afrocentric alternative to Western feminism which fails according to her, to wholeheartedly accept the concepts of "*motherhood, nature and nurture*" (Acholonu, 1995:108, emphasis hers) which are necessary for the stability of the family and human societies everywhere. She views other African women "isms" as appendages of Western feminism because of the inability of their proponents to carve a distinct identity (instead of parroting) which recognizes the core values and socio-cultural realities of the continent. For African feminism to be relevant to the African environment, Acholonu (1995:104-105) argues that, it:

... must take cognizance of the peculiarities of the life of the African woman in Africa, her changing positions and numerous roles within the African rural and urban environment, the shifting nature of gender relations for the woman in her different roles as mother, daughter, sister, wife, grand-mother, priestess, queen, (community) leader, goddess etc.

The failure of African feminism in this regard, in Acholonu's view, necessitates the invention of Motherism as a better alternative. She argues further that the theory is the answer because it is an all-embracing ideology based on love, as the Motherist accepts the whole world and humanity as her constituency.

However, the obvious contradiction lies in Motherism's claim to universality; a claim which happens to be one of the main reason for the rejection of feminism by many Black women. Motherism's vision of the world and humanity as a constituency is a weakness that does not account for the rejection of some institutions such as marriage and motherhood (on which it rests) by some Western feminists.

Third World Feminism

Much has already been said on how women and scholars from outside the Western feminist hegemony have rejected Eurocentric feminism in favour of other culture and class-specific strands. Because of the accident of geographical location and socio-cultural and economic conditioning, African women have equally found themselves situated within the wider framework of Third World feminists. African women as an integral part of Third World women have provided alternate voices in discussing feminism; therefore, it becomes imperative "to situate African women's struggle and self-expression within African cultural context as well as within the larger struggle of Third World and all Blacks" (Kolawole, 1997:19).

One of the fundamental issues crucial to the rejection of Western-oriented feminism by Third World women is the issue of family and motherhood. Despite the recognition of the roles patriarchy play in their subjugation and domination, African women and their diasporic counterparts evince a collaboration with men in ending oppression and achieving equality, which is the ultimate goal of feminist ideologies. Even though Mohanty (1991) rejects every stereotype that enhances women oppression, Audre Lorde's (1984) cry "the master's tool will never demolish the master's house" is quite instructive in Third World women's rejection of "white feminism".

Third World feminism, in proper context, is borne out of a desire by women from outside the space of Western feminist culture to engage the forces of tradition and patriarchal set-up in a battle of wits. It is not surprising that Third World traditional values such as female circumcision, Indian tradition of Sati, Chinese foot binding, and Arabo-Islamic purdah are still been seen and discussed from Western lenses. After all, feminism in its original form privileges white women, their experiences and orientations. This "Westernization" of Third World feminist discourse has attracted criticisms. Narayan (1997:3) confirms this when she holds that:

Many Third World feminists confront the attitude that our criticisms of our cultures are merely more incarnation of a colonized consciousness, the views of "privileged native woman in whiteface" seeking to attack their "non-western culture" on the basis of "Western values".

As a way of replying the critics, Narayan (1997) goes on to explicate that every Third World feminist regardless of geographical space have their concerns and analyses:

... rooted in and responsive to the problems women face within their national contexts and to argue that they are not simpleminded emulations of Western feminist political concerns. (4).

These aforementioned positions are borne out of the painful realization that male-dominated Third World societies have constructed some of these cultural practices which oppress women as longstanding traditions that represent their societal values and are equally tied to the spiritual and respectful position women occupy in these societies (Narayan, 1997). Even though many women living in the geographic space called "Third World" share this view, they also know from their day-to-day experiences that some of these traditions are inimical to their well-being and therefore, must make a concerted effort to eradicate these negative traditions. FGM practices belong to this negative group of traditions because their most important justification is based on their avowed importance as socio-cultural signifiers, despite the negative health implications they have on women.

On the other hand however, Mohanty (1991) has thrown up the notion of "imagined community" in attempting to identify what binds Third World women together. She argues that there is a large body of works on women in developing countries, women liberation movements and women within individual cultural space. Therefore, she holds that the idea of imagined communities is essential for properly understanding that rather than cultural and biological *raison d'être* for an alliance of Third World women, political consideration is far more binding. To underscore this, (Mohanty, 1991:4) describes Third World women as:

... imagined communities of women with divergent histories and social locations, woven together by the *political* threads of opposition to forms of domination that are not only pervasive but also systemic (emphasis hers).

To Mohanty, the alliance of Third World women should not be strictly based on culture and gender alone, rather the fulcrum of their opposition should be the overriding desire to end the domination of women.

FGM and Third World Feminism: A Marriage of Convenience

It is my considered opinion that Third World feminism is the best feminism strand for interrogating FGM because the practices are cultural and are predominantly practiced in many of the so-called Third World countries. Furthermore, it is trite to conclude that feminism has been questioned for its inherent contradictions and shortcomings by many Third World women, who challenge it on the ground of cultural imperialistic posturing. In addition, due to the failure of feminism to account for the meaning of gender, class and race within its larger framework, its simplistic narrowing of these terms in boxes such as middle-class, white experiences, homophobia and ethnocentrism has raised the antennae of suspicion and criticism in other women. For instance, Leila Ahmed (1983) condemns Western feminists' postulations for centering principally on the veil as the supreme symbol of Islamic oppression of women. Whereas, cultural and traditional issues like the purdah and FGM can be better understood from the prism of a culture specific and respecting ideology; and this is one area where Third World feminism comes in handy as it recognizes how culture and traditions are instrumental in the oppression of women within national boundaries. It suffices to opine that a lot of Third World women equally suffer under the heavy weight of oppressive traditional practices such as FGM, which is practiced mostly in countries classified as being Third World by their geographies and economies. To remove FGM from its socio-cultural and historical contexts is to trivialize it. As a result, Third World feminism becomes the preferred choice for any discourse on FGM amongst the strands of feminism available in literary discourse.

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