Carving the Body: Female Circumcision in African Women's Memoirs

Natasha Gordon-Chipembere (University of South Africa)

Introduction

Alison T. Slack states that 'female circumcision has been practised from as early as 2500 years ago and continues in practice today in over forty countries' (1988, p.489). Female circumcision is a worldwide phenomenon, practised in twenty six African countries, Malaysia, Indonesia, the southern parts of the Arab Peninsula, Pakistan, Russia, Peru, Brazil, Eastern Mexico, Australia, and in immigrant communities in Europe and the United States. Fran Hosken notes in her 1994 *Hosken Report,* that 99% of the female population in Somalia and Djibouti have experienced some form of circumcision, and that 80 to 90% of Ethiopian, Eritrean, Gambian, Northern Sudanese and Sierra Leonean women have been circumcised. The Ivory Coast, Kenya, Egypt, Mali, Burkina Faso, Chad, Liberia, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, and Nigeria have a circumcised female population of 60 to 75%. Countries with circumcised female populations under 50% include Togo, Benin, Mauritania, Ghana and Senegal. In the *Hosken Report*, there are no current statistics available for Sub-Saharan Africa. Most of the women who were infibulated (the most severe form of circumcision) lived in Mali, Northern Sudan, Eritrea, Eastern Ethiopia, Djibouti and Somalia (Hosken, 1994, p.45).

Female circumcision is the removal of some or all of the female genitals. The WHO has outlined three basic types: circumcision (the removal of the clitoris), excision (removal of the clitoris and labia minora), and infibulation (removal of clitoris, inner and other vaginal lips, and the sewing together of the vaginal orifice, leaving a space the size of a rice grain for urine and menstruation). The age ranges from a few days after birth to

right before childbirth, however it is most prevalent during puberty, with the median age range 6-12. A midwife or circumciser uses various utensils including razors, knives and scissors. It may also be done in a hospital or health clinic under anaesthesia.

The health risks are immense, the first being death. A long term result of circumcision is the development of neuroma, which renders the entire genital area unbearable to touch. Also, there is the presence of vulval abscesses, constant infections, damage to other vital organs, and the greater susceptibility to HIV because of the interchange of blood during penetration or de-infibulation with an unclean circumciser's tool. Needless to say, a circumcised woman feels severe pain during intercourse - known as dyspareunia. (Dorkenoo, 1992, p.8). Dr. Baashir of Sudan notes in his studies and fieldwork among circumcised women, that there is a history of psychiatric disturbances in women who have undergone the operation, namely 'anxiety attacks, psychotic excitement, reactive depressive states as well as sexual frigidity, pain and sufferings during intercourse' (1977, p.4).

A woman who is infibulated has to be cut open for penetration on her wedding night and opened again for each birth she has. Though research on the practice and effects of female circumcision on women and children is increasing, there has yet to be data which documents a historical origin for the practice (el Dareer, 1982, p.2). Dr. Marie Assad's research in Egypt proposes that the origins of female circumcision are Egyptian, since evidence has been found that infibulation was practised on ancient mummies. Thus, infibulation is also called *Pharonic circumcision* in the Sudan. In Egypt, it is referred to as *Sudanese Circumcision* (Assad, 1980, p.4). Fran Hosken notes that the term infibulation goes back to the time of the Romans:

> Fibula means clasp or pin in Latin. To prevent sexual intercourse, the Romans fastened a fibula through the large lips of women... Infibulated female slaves from Upper Egypt and Sudan fetched a higher price on the slave markets of

> Cairo up to the 19th century, as childbearing hampers work. (1994, p.33)

Yet, there remains no substantial proof of Pharonic origins. Janice Boddy cites Ghalioungui, Heulsman and Barclay, historians who conclude that 'analysis of human mummies from that period fails to confirm this assertion so far as pre-mortem vaginal closure is concerned' (1989, p.51). Slack makes it clear that female circumcision was practised before Judaism, Christianity or Islam. She says, 'it is likely that female circumcision, as with male circumcision, was initially part of the traditional puberty rites, in which young women and men were introduced into the adult world - a rite of passage' (1988, pp.443-444). Lillian Passmore Sanderson adds that 'Strabo described Pharonic Circumcision in 23 BC amongst the Danakils of Ethiopia and in Egypt. He also described excision in the first century AD in Egypt' (1981, p.27). Harold B. Barclay claims that 'from its geographic distribution, infibulation apparently represents a local elaboration of clitoridectomy in Neolithic times by an undifferentiated Hamito-Semitic culture' (1964, p.29). Though no religion mandates the practice, Islam has accepted it the most culturally.

Nawal el Saadawi in *The Hidden Face of Eve* has probably the most poignant and specific data to date on the prescriptions made to young Muslim girls upon their reaching puberty. Maintenance of one's virginity ensured a good marriage, which created the possibility of moving the family out of economic hardship, or into another class. The importance of circumcision was felt in all realms of social life. In order to belong, a girl had to carefully guard her hymen so that she would preserve the honour of her family on her wedding night. It was not uncommon for young girls who were suspected of not being virgins on their wedding night to be killed by their male relatives. The commodification of a woman's body was

continually articulated within the various rituals which announced her progress into womanhood.[1]

It is clear that female circumcision predates Islam, yet research conducted by Awa Thiam among Islamic scholars lead back to one myth, which suggest the origins of excision:

> Long before the time of Mahomet, there was a prophet named Ibrahima (Abraham), who was married to his cousin Sarata (Sara). He went up to the land of Gerar where reigned King Abimelech who delighted in taking unto himself all men's wives who were remarkable for their beauty. Now it happened that Sarata was unusually fair. And the king did not hesitate to try to take her from her husband. A super-natural power prevented him from taking advantage of her, which so astounded him that he set her free. And he restored her back to her husband and made her the gift of a handmaid named Hadiara (Hagar). Sarata and her husband lived together for a long time but Sarata bore Ibrahima no children. And eventually, Ibrahima took Hadiara to wife: some say that it was Sarata who said to her husband that he should take her handmaid to wife, since she herself could not bear him no children. And so Sarata and Hadiara became co-wives to Ibrahima. And Hadiara bore him a son and his name was Ismaila (Ishmael); and Sarata also bore a son to Ibrahima and he was called Ishaga (Isaac). In the course of time, the relationship between the women deteriorated. And so it came to pass that one day Sarata excised Hadiara. Some say that she only pierced her ears, while others maintain she did indeed excise her. (Thiam, 1986, p.9)

The Koran does not mandate circumcision. Many religious male scholars who are responsible for interpreting the *Hadiths* (sayings) of the Prophet Mohammed state that the Prophet opposed total circumcision, especially infibulation. However, the Prophet Mohammed suggested that 'if you circumcise, take only a small part and refrain from cutting most of the

1. An infibulated woman, for example, maintained a relationship with her circumciser throughout her lifetime, including on the night of her wedding for de-infibulation, and at child birth for de-infibulation and re-infibulation. The various rituals in which her body became the commodity of both midwife and husband progressed throughout her lifetime as a woman.

clitoris off. The woman will have a bright and happy face, and is more welcome to her husband, if her pleasure is complete' (Saadawi, 1980, p.39).

Marriage is seen as a fundamental obligation of men and women in Islam: 'Islamic sanction backs this notion in the saying that marriage completes one's religion' (Kennedy, 1978, p.159). If one is only complete when married, then the process which enables one to become marriageable takes on immeasurable status within the community. Women have to 'become' marriageable, and el Saadawi notes that women are groomed all their lives in order to become marriageable and thus fulfil their religious obligations (1980, p.183). Part of the social obligation in this preparation is circumcision (all types) as it maintains the central link to the other life rituals necessary for identity formation. Within many cultures which practice female circumcision, there is little question as to whether the tradition should be maintained or not. It is imperative that one notes the intricate socio-cultural and religious layering of which circumcision plays a part of, in order to clearly understand why this tradition has lasted for over 2500 years and has been so readily accepted by some Muslims throughout Africa and the Middle East.

It is at this ironic junction that one notes that even though it is maintained by some Islamic countries in Africa, a larger portion of the Middle East actually condemns the practice as it is not mandated by the Koran. Thus, the weight of circumcision lies more within its socio-cultural bearings than its religious mandates. However, it is maintained within an age-old community of women and *dayas* who make their money off this practice, justifying it as an obligation in Islam. Not only is economics an immediate incentive, but the prestige, status, and communal authority that these women demand, and are given, are heavy investments and justifications for why midwives support the practice.

With the advent of fundamentalist Islamic interpretation and law, many Muslim women were kept within the confines of the private home

sphere; there was little encouragement for education, outside of religious instruction. Women found it difficult to challenge the advice of men (as evinced in the life work of Nawal el Saadawi) as they interpreted the Koran as they saw fit. Though many of the Hadiths were narrated by the Prophet Mohammed's wives or daughters, much contemporary (19th and 20th century) interpretation has fallen in the hands of the Islamic religious elite, namely men. In traditional homes, women were trained to serve and never question. Their identification as good wives and mothers taught them not to go against the holy words of Allah, transmitted by their fathers, brothers, or husbands. In her book, *Daughter of Isis*, Saadawi recounts that it was only her father and uncle who were allowed to read from the Koran, not the women of the house (1999, p.8). She recounts horrific stories of young girls in Egypt, whose bodies were found by the police, killed by their families because it was suspected that their swollen bodies indicated an illegitimate pregnancy. Autopsies confirmed the presence of accumulated menstrual blood that was unable to be released because of a tight infibulation (Saadawi, 1980, p.26).

With such pious devotion on one hand comes an almost extreme sense of power wielding and domination found amongst Muslim women. Here we must take into consideration Chandra Mohanty's assertion that sisterhood should not be taken for granted because of gender (Mohanty, 1984, p.399). In all areas of oppression there exist multi-faceted layers of power structures which need to be unpacked in order to deconstruct the creation of women by other women. Respect for elders, specifically one's mother-in-law, combined with a hierarchical system of living, constitute the way that many Muslim women interact with each other. Therefore, great pressure was placed on women who were uncircumcised, and the valuing of tight infibulations render young girls more honourable and extremely marriageable.

Women Constructing Other Women

Janice Boddy presents a rather fascinating method of interpreting female circumcision in her research among the Hofriyati of Northern Sudan. Women of the Hofriyati view and utilize circumcision as a method of creating 'gendered' entities in their community. Children are raised genderless and it is not until boys and girls are circumcised that they begin to take on the societal understandings and responsibilities of their sex. Thus:

> Among Hofriyati, women actively and ongoingly construct other women [...] from the body of man. By eliminating any vestiges of maleness, they constitute women as separate entities and distinct social people. (Boddy, 1989, p.58)

It is here that, taking into consideration the socio-cultural relevance of the practice, one must problematize the concept of women creating other women. This concept looks at the inherent aspects of bodily fragmentation and re-creation which result from its socio-economic and historical constructions of the African continent. It is critical that the idea of women using circumcision as a form of gender identification and formation becomes clearly understood when looking at the socio-cultural and economic power structures which keep the practice alive today. Women begin to shift and re-create power structures within their specific social and cultural spheres, which cannot be readily dismissed as secondary to the proverbial omniscient male gaze. Rather, as Chandra Mohanty asserts:

> Male violence must be theorized and interpreted within specific societies, both in order to understand it better as well as to effectively organize to change it. Sisterhood cannot be assumed on the basis of gender; it must be forged in concrete, historical and political practice and analysis. (1984, p.399)

Africa, the colonial landscape narrated into being by the 1885 Berlin Conference, had superficial boundaries, borderlands and borderlines cross lives, traditions, cosmologies, and languages – all regulated into Europeanized nation states. Using this metaphorical framework, the circumcised woman becomes 'colonized' under the hands of the circumciser, in so much as she is forced into a new identity, doing away with her

previous 'childlike' self into an identity sanctioned and normalised by the larger society. At the same time, Senegal's first president, Leopold Senghor employs his own nationalist designs upon African women. In his Negritude poems of the early 1960s, Senghor celebrates Mother Africa, with her fertile valleys and rich traditions, in order for the populous to reclaim a traditional African past symbolically found in the hands and body of the African woman:

> Naked woman, dark woman
> Ripe fruit with firm flesh, dark raptures of black wine,
> Mouth that gives music to my mouth
> Savanna of clear horizons, savanna quivering to the fervent
> caress
>
> Of the East Wind, sculptured tom-tom, stretched drumskin
> Moaning under the hands of the conqueror
> Your deep contralto voice is the spiritual song of the
> Beloved. (Senghor, 1956, p.43)

Mapping the Body

The body takes on social agency as women are constructed into 'females' from 'male' parts. As the midwife carved away the genitals, she becomes the symbolic embodiment of a patriarchal, gendered entity upon which she shapes and defines the 'feminine' with her surgery. It is pertinent to clarify that I am not suggesting that the circumciser becomes male (in actuality she assumes certain masculine powers); however, she is firmly rooted in a created and imagined feminine space which has been defined through the historically revered position of the midwife. The scarification of circumcision and in particular, infibulation, is an actual and immediate *mapping* or *drawing* upon the bodies of women so that their commitment to the social responsibilities (defined through their sex) is ensured and manifests in their socio-economic relations once they have entered womanhood. The context of the 'map' creates a legitimate physical space upon the female body, forcing it to re-member the act as well as its socio-cultural relevance and responsibilities. Mapping/drawing creates links

among circumcised women to navigate their bodies in similar, unifying ways. The act of circumcision creates the norm. The power of the circumciser as she maps/draws upon the body of other women is enunciated as she creates a permanency which links her to the lives of these women forever.

Vigdis Broche-Due introduces the concept of morphology, which is the 'way in which the shapes and surfaces of particular anatomical bodies are marked and mapped within a cultural system of meaning' (1993, p.33). Thus, a circumcised woman's body becomes continuously re-mapped and re-constructed as she moves through the stages of her life as a woman - this includes infibulation, de-infibulation on the nuptial night and re-infibulation after childbirth. Within the discourse of the female body, the skin, the body – the actual surface of the physiology of the woman (here the gaze focuses on the genital area) – becomes the primary site in which boundaries are created and re-created in order to manipulate and contain anticipated social transgressions. Also, these borderlines – openings and closings – come to define specific gendered understandings which regulate the actions and responsibilities of a woman within her community.

The body becomes re-inscribed, when circumcised, as a newborn along cultural lines and expectations. The female body is thus carved into the social realm, where she becomes an active participant in the community. Prior to this carving of flesh, she is marginal and not 'purely feminine.' The flesh manifests itself into an image of society, thus a language is created between the women who are circumcised and the women who perform the surgery. This language is the unspoken/mute, implicit dependency a woman, especially an infibulated one, has to the circumciser, as she moves from wedding night to the birth of children and the need to be de/re infibulated. This language has incredible power, though silent, to reinforce gender identity. Broche-due suggests that among the Somali, it is not the maintenance of virginity which provokes the need for infibulation, but it is

the actual societal 'making' or 'construction' of the woman through the surgery, by the removal of her 'male' part, by other *female* hands which is pertinent in the development of gender roles in the community (1993, p.45).

The closure of the vagina is a human operation and renders the circumciser at once god-like and powerful, as her act creates, or gives birth to, a woman. Once she is sewn up, the infibulated woman becomes a thread in the fabric of her society. Her body joins others in a language which is muted because there is the instant separation of her sexuality from her biological function - reproduction. The primary job of the clitoris is for sexual stimulation. When some or all of the genitals are removed, the ability for full sexual development is hindered in the process. Marriage, after becoming 'purified' ultimately leads to childbearing. This notion is so deeply engrained in the justifications of the tradition that it is believed that the procedure ensures fertility. In reality, this is not the case.

The dialogue invested in the power dynamics between circumciser and circumcised is critical in the formation of gendered entities within the community. This dynamic enables the practice to have profound significance as a primary step which women take as they identify with a specific community. Not only does circumcision have its economic benefits, as the midwife maintains her livelihood in this manner, but it also works to secure the social fabric of the community. Status and communal authority are powerful reasons why midwives continue to support the practice, outside of economics.

What is pertinent in viewing the historical trajectory of female circumcision is that, once beyond the facts and figures, one begins to negotiate the space that remains muted by circumcision. Clearly the practice has survived for over 2500 years because it is taboo and remains unspoken, yet continued. Why does the practice remain virtually invisible in African cultural production which illuminates aspects of daily life? Seemingly, the investment that circumcision has in the formation of identity and

maintenance of cultural norms (birth, circumcision, marriage, reproduction, death) allows it to become an unquestioned cultural foundation unto itself. Thus, it is with radical steps and new 'tongues' that African women writers break the silence and speak the language of circumcision.

African Women Writers: The Search for a Whole Self

> My body was gone in a second, just as they had said. I could hear *shuu* [...] like the sound when they are slicing meat - just like that was the way she sliced my body. She cut everything, she didn't cut the big lips, but she sliced off my clitoris and the two black little lips, which were *HARAM* -impure- all that she sliced off like meat [...] I thought I was going to die. She [then] sliced the top off my big lips, and then she took thorns like needles and put them in crossways, across my vagina, to close it up. She put in seven thorns, and each time she put one in she tightened them together with string. (Boddy, 1994, p.56)
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> I found the women coming in and gathering round, and then they took hold of me and forced my legs open and cut away the mulberry with a razor. They left me with a wound in my body and another deep inside me, feeling that a wrong has been done to me, a wrong that could never be undone. (Rifaat, 1983, p.9)

African women writers write *between* themselves and *amongst* themselves on issues of the body and female circumcision in multivalent ways. They use 'other tongues.' Mae Gwendolyn Henderson, in her article, 'Speaking in Tongues: Dialogic, Dialectics, and the Black Woman Writer's Literary Tradition,' states that:

> Black women's writing is ... interlocutory, or dialogic, reflecting not only a relationship with the 'other(s)' but an internal dialogue with the plural aspects of self that constitute the matrix of black female subjectivity. The interlocutory character of black women's writings is, thus, not only a consequence of a dialogic relationship with an imaginary or 'generalized Other', but a dialogue with the aspects of 'otherness' within the self. (1990, p.259)

What I am suggesting here is that though Henderson creates this paradigm for a seemingly African-American female constituency, this idea of inner speech can be readily applied to the African woman writer. I believe that

African women do begin a process of speaking to the silenced parts of their 'otherness,' parts that were physically and spiritually taken from them, in most cases before puberty. Their sexual identity is thus framed within the imaginary; the imagined self, distanced from bodies which are physically present. They thereby write an astounding narration of re-membering female bodies back onto the text and into a physical place of wholeness. Even today, there is apparent tension between the articulation of the narrative of female circumcision and its need, in many cultural and religious contexts, to remain part of the unspoken. Davies adds, 'other tongues locate speech within the context of gender, identity, sexuality, and the politics of location. For it is location which allows one to speak or not speak, to be affirmed in one's speech or rejected, to be heard or censored' (1994, p.153).

Most important in the literature created is an articulation of how women resist each other *as* women, through the writing of female circumcision and the remembering of the body. The power of the 'gaze' becomes more immediate and personal, and so there are many levels of resistance which become inscribed onto the text. Therefore, the irony is even more poignant when Lloyd Brown asserts that African male writers such as Senghor and others have 'collective images of a collective African womanhood-as-symbol [which] are significant as idealizing concepts rather than as literary accurate descriptions of the woman's situation throughout an entire continent' (1975, p.496). Here we see the Mother Africa trope employed again.

In this respect, African women writers, such as Alifa Rifaat, Nawal el Saadawi, Waris Dirie, Aman, Charity Waciuma, Awa Thiam and others, force movement towards this personal space, in giving a voice to an unspoken reality that an estimated one hundred million women have had no historical public space for others to hear their testimonies about their cutting. A new space is thus opened; one that is hopefully not destined for marginality. I do not assume that circumcised African women have not

always spoken amongst and between themselves about the practice, but as a collective public effort, I feel new ground is being forged by African women writers.

In addressing issues of the place of Black/Third World women writers, Carole Boyce Davies utilizes the theory of critical relationality as a way of refuting the need of placing Black/Third World women in a dichotomous binary that is endemic of Western imperialist designs for categorizations and location:

> Critical relationality, then moves beyond singularity or sameness to varies interactions, transgression and articulations. Critical relationality becomes a way in which other theoretical positions interact relationality in one's critical consciousness. Critical relationality moves beyond a singular, monochromatic approach to any work to a complexly-integrated and relational theoretics; it allows the situation of a text in its own context, but provides an ability to understand and relate it to a range of other dimensions of thought. Critical relationality is then inherently migratory. (Davies, 1994, p.56)

Davies uses this theory to suggest that Black/Third World women writers then cannot be placed in monolithic, stagnant categories. Rather, as writers, they become sojourners between the borderlines/lands which conspire to separate margins and centres, home and the metropole, yet in actuality, these borderlines/lands become a 'third space' of their own. Movement back and forth between locations opens up a discourse for the articulation of the varied localities and identities that Black/Third World women embody and recreate in their texts.

Do African women who write about female circumcision actually re-articulate and negotiate new spaces for their bodies? Are they constant migrants, using language as a tool with which to travel over their bodies, to shift? Carole Boyce Davies appropriately adds:

> They [Black/Third World women writers] expand the epistemological bases which have limited our ability to explore the cultural texts in which we are implicated. These in turn produce what can be identified as a 'new space,' an

> area of transformation and change where we can no longer accept a factual or natural account of history and culture, nor simply seek to retrieve a hidden authentic identity. (Davies, 1994, p.154)

In the case of female circumcision, African women's bodies become textualized by patriarchy as well as by other women. Female bodies become venues upon which words are re-written in order for the body to move outside the hidden and omniscient scopophilia of the patriarchal gaze. One discovers and investigates what significance this 'gaze' takes on when women circumcise other women. Laura Mulvey in her article, 'Visual Please and Narrative Cinema,' states that in cinema:

> Traditionally, the woman displayed has functioned on two levels: as erotic object for the characters within the screen story and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium, with a shifting tension between the looks on either side of the screen. (1989, p.19)

Thus, what is questioned here is the subjectivity of the young, circumcised girl: does she become an erotic figure for the looming, omnipresent patriarchy (whether it be father, husband or mother-in-law who can check her circumcision before agreeing to the marriage) and/or does she become/remain an erotic object to the *daya* who slices off her genitalia with a '*shuu* - like the sound when they are slicing meat' (Barnes, 1994, p.56). However, aspects of erotica do not present themselves in the long run, as power and social responsibility overshadow sensuality. In many ways the power of the gaze (by women in the case of female circumcision) causes a fragmented representation of the female body - only aspects are magnified.

Nawal el Saadawi notes in *The Hidden Face of Eve,* that some female circumcision ceremonies [2] were accompanied by ululating women and in rural areas drumming and other musical instruments, primarily to celebrate this rite of passage, but essentially to drown out the screams of

2. Please note that not all circumcisions are accompanied by ceremonies. Asma el Dareer notes in *Woman, Why Do You Weep?* that as time progresses, younger and younger girls are being circumcised, moving away from the initial understanding of female circumcision as a rite of passage. In most cases now, female circumcision has been a means of maintaining chastity, virginity and fidelity among women.

pain from the young girls. In *Possessing the Secret of Joy* by Alice Walker, the *tsunga,* (Walker's word for circumciser) M'Lissa cynically tells the protagonist Tashi how her sister Dura died from loss of blood after her circumcision. When asked if she remembered Dura, M'Lissa responds, 'I could lie... and tell you I remember her. After all the years I did this work, faces are the last thing I remember' (Walker, 1992, p.252). Thus, fragmented bodies become a necessity for women who must circumcise other women and the gaze is re-located elsewhere. Does conventional patriarchal power of the spectator become transferred onto the women who excise and infibulate young girls and women? The patriarchal power of the gaze is temporally transferred onto the *tsunga* as a way of keeping women within strict patriarchal confines, which inherently calls for the policing of women's bodies by other women. However, even within this context, women remain women and male power becomes reclaimed and reshaped into something conceptually feminine.

Saadawi's Memoir

> At the age of six I could not save myself from it [FC]. Four women, as hefty as Um Muhammad, cornered me, and pinned me down by the hands and feet, as though crucifying me like the Messiah by hammering nails through his hands, and feet. Since I was a child, that deep wound left in my body has never healed.
>
> But the deeper wound has been the one left in my spirit, in my soul. I can not forget that day in the summer of 1937. Fifty-six years have gone by, but I still remember it, as though it was only yesterday. I lay in a pool of blood. After a few days the bleeding stopped, and the daya peered between my thighs, and said, 'All is well. The wound has healed, thanks be to God.' But the pain was there, like an abscess deep in my flesh. I did not know what other parts in my body there were that might need to be cut off … I had no idea what fate had in store for me… the future was full of danger… my body.. had turned against me (Saadawi, 1999, pp.63-64).

Nawal el Saadawi, medical doctor, writer, activist, visionary, Egyptian, mother and wife, was born in 1931 in the village of Kafr Thla in the Al-Kalyoubeya province of Egypt. The commitment to writing about female

circumcision has inspired her for over four decades of activism and literary production. However, in a recent interview (June 7, 2005) Saadawi notes that the most challenging aspect of writing is about disclosing her own experience with circumcision. She states:

> Only when I started writing, did the memory come back of hearing my younger brother cry and cry because he was being circumcised. It was very difficult to write about being circumcised. Several times I burned the papers or threw them away. It is a big risk to decide to publish it, when you could just put it away in a drawer. I use a lot of my female characters to process being circumcised (Saadawi, Interview, June 7, 2005).

The tension which is present in her personal quest to write about the wound 'left in my spirit, in my soul' juxtaposed against her professional medical observations amongst circumcised women makes her memory of the procedure even more poignant. Clearly, the legacy of the pain informs her activism but also informs the development of her female characters, from Firdaus in *Woman at Point Zero* to Hamida in *The Circling Song*. Saadawi, imprisoned under the Sadat Regime in 1980, was one of the first Muslim African women to write openly about Muslim women and sex. Her discussion ranges from female circumcision to childhood marriages, challenging the interpretation of the Koran about the silenced role of women, who during the time of the Prophet, had active, vocal participation in society, as evinced by his wife, Khadija.

It is her writing that fills the 'abscess deep in [her] flesh.' Without a clitoris, Saadawi writes away the notions of violence that pervade her memories of the women (not men) reaching into the depths of her child-body, to carve away her pleasure. And so with new 'tongue,' Saadawi writes pleasure into her text, into her life through her characters as she gives them lives that actuate realities not confined with traditional Islamic settings. Saadawi states, 'All my life I wanted to write about my life. And when I started writing, the memories came slowly. I started to write when I was 18 years old' (Interview, June 7, 2005).

Waris' Story

> The next thing I felt was my flesh, my genitals, being cut away. I heard the sound of the dull blade sawing back and forth through my skin. When I think back, I honestly can't believe that this happened to me. I feel as if I were talking about someone else. There's no way in the work that I can explain what it feels like. It's like somebody slicing through the meat of your thigh, or cutting off your arm, except this is the most sensitive part of your body. However, I didn't move an inch, I wanted Mama to be proud of me. I just sat there as if I were made of stone, telling myself the more I moved around, the longer the torture would take. My legs began to quiver of their own accord. I passed out. When I woke up, the Killer Woman has piled next to her a stack of thorns from an acacia tree. She used these to puncture holes to sew me up. My legs were completely numb, but the pain between them was so intense that I wished I would die (Dirie, 1998, p.42).

Waris Dirie, Somali supermodel and UNFPA Special Ambassador for the Elimination of Female Genital Mutilation, tells a compelling story of her own infibulation at the age of five in Somalia. In her candid reflections, the mere recalling of the cutting is shocking and distancing to her adult mind. In the writing process, she stops, horrified that this has been done to her and that she will never have to true ability to share the feelings of that moment. Her memory is laced with her childhood desire to please her mother, at the same time she names the woman who cuts her, Killer Woman. The words are weighty and imply not just a child's name-calling, but a metaphoric bringer of death. Her autobiography, *Desert Flower*, recounts how many other Somali girls did not heal or survive under the circumciser's blade. One of the most poignant moments is when she looks over after having been sewn up and sees 'pieces of my meat, my sex, lay on top, drying undisturbed in the sun' (Dirie, 1998, p.43).

Some fifteen years later, a model and living in Europe, Dirie chooses to become de-infibulated by medical surgery. She states:

> Within two or three weeks, I was back to normal. Well, not exactly normal, but more like a woman who hadn't been circumcised. Waris was a new woman. I could sit down on

> the toilet and pee – whoosh! There's not way to explain what a new freedom that was' (Dirie, 1998, p.148).

The notion of freedom is liberating in the simple act of urination, but also the ability to create a new identity for herself as a politicized, de-infibulated Somali woman. She remains true to her cultural identity, yet her lived experiences motivate her to educate all who will listen against infibulation. She gave up her modelling career to become a UN Ambassador towards the collective abandonment of circumcision in Somalia.

Conclusion

Female circumcision exists today because of its socio-cultural significance, where the value of belonging to one's group and being recognized as a meaningful and thoughtful participating member of the community may outweigh the pain and life-long health implications of circumcision. I propose that women are as responsible for the practice as their male counterparts. Men alone cannot be held solely responsible for a practice which dates back some 2500 years. Rather, it becomes much more intriguing to envision the potential of working women and men together towards eradication, as Tostan in Senegal and Maendeleo ya Wanawake in Kenya have proven possible.

The challenge remains for one to imagine places where female circumcision has proper self-articulation without being silenced by other 'do-good communities'[3] or external patriarchal pressures. In order to fully appreciate the ways in which women interact and maintain power relationships with each other, specific cultural understandings have to be considered. Both Saadawi and Dirie write their stories as venues through which politicisation and activism is initiated by themselves, their female characters and those they educate through the presence of their words on a historically taboo subject. Both authors make it clear that women are as

3. The reference here are to some Western feminists who have taken up the banner of FC as a fight, insisting that they must speak for the women being cut, as these women cannot speak for themselves. Discussions about this tension can be found in *African Women and Feminism*, edited by O. Oyewumi.

liable for the continuation of the practice as their male partners. However, without breaking the myths with new 'tongues' the practice will remain relegated as 'simply' a woman's issue, and therefore a silenced and un-prioritised topic, or a sensationalised feminist topic which again silences the women who are being cut.

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