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WRITING WOMEN'S RITES: EXCISION IN EXPERIENTIAL AFRICAN LITERATURE

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Synopsis — This article examines "excision" (a.k.a. "female circumcision," Female Genital Mutilation [FGM] or, more recently, Female Genital Cutting [FGC]) in African Women's first-person accounts. While considering the shift from female third-person narratives to "experiential" texts, the article also outlines three steps—(1) in-passing; (2) auto(-)biography; and (3) suturing—in delineating the *herstory* of the representation of excision in postcolonial African literature, which in turn, contributes to the general shift in the literary text from *rite* to *mutilation* so that women's rites now clash with human rights. © 2001 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past 2 decades, the body of literary representations of excision (a.k.a. "female circumcision") has considerably grown, but it still constitutes a little explored corpus, in inverse proportion to the wide socio-geographical spread of the practice and the sheer mass of information available from activist organizations and media networks or the research carried out in cultural anthropology, law, and sociology. With the exception of written documentaries such as Nayra Atiya's *Khul Khaal: Five Egyptian Women and their Stories* (Atiya, 1982), or film documentaries like Pratibha Parmar's *Warrior Marks* (1993) or Anne-Laure Folly's *Femmes aux Yeux Ouverts* (Folly, 1998), literature remains a privileged place where women's voices can be heard, all the more so in first-person accounts or what one might call "experiential texts."

In the literary text, excision has, over the years, shifted from being a ritual, a *rite* to being a *mutilation* so that women's rites now clash with human rights or what the Lebanese-born Evelyn Accad (1992) has termed "(W)Human Rights."[1] Until women-writers started documenting that shift, the representation of excision in fiction had been fathered by men, albeit sympathetically. Among the male writers who write about or around the practice, we can mention the Somali Nurrudin Farah in *From a Crooked Rib* (Farah, 1970) and *Sardines* (Farah, 1981); Ahmadou Kourouma from Ivory Coast in *Les Soleils des indépendances* (Kourouma, 1968) /*Suns of Independence*; the Malian Yambo Ouologuem in *Le devoir de violence/Bound to Violence* (Ouologuem, 1971); and the Kenyan Ngugi Wa Thiong'o in *The River Between* (Wa Thiong'o, 1965) and *A Grain of Wheat* (Wa Thiong'o, 1967). More recently, the Malian Dombi-Fakoly in *La Révolte des Galsénésiennes* (Dombi-Fakoly, 1994), the Nigerian playwright Ladi Ladebo in *Symbolic Rites* (Ladebo, 1997), the Ivorian Koffi Kwahulé in *Et son petit ami l'appelait Samiagamal* (1997) or the African-American, Lagos-based Chuck Mike in *Sense of Belonging* (forthcoming 2002) have also been sympathetic to the abolition of the rite.

In considering the shift not so much from male narration to female narration but from female third-person narratives to female experiential texts, I distinguish between three steps in delineating the history or rather *herstory* of the representation of excision in postcolonial literature. The first step is the "in-passing" method, which Irène Assiba d'Almeida (1994)

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has defined, in another context, as "a strategy by which the writer describes in passing, that is, by what seem like innocent, benign observations, difficult issues women are confronted with in their daily lives" (1994, p. 37).

IN PASSING

One day, the eponymous character from the novel *Efuru* (1966) by the Nigerian Flora Nwapa is reminded of the primary function of excision; she is told that a young woman must "have her bath" before she has a baby (1966, p. 14). Tobe Levin (1986) has stressed the euphemistic nature of the expression "to have a bath"—to refer to excision,[2] but one must keep in mind that the phrase is "relexified" (Zabus, 1990, 1995) from Igbo, the Oguta variant of which is *Isa aru* or *Iwu aru*, which best conveys in English the original twin ideas of cleanliness and purification. It acts as a reminder that Latin-derived words like "excision," "circumcision" and *a fortiori* "mutilation" do not exist as such in the societies where the practice is ritualistically performed. For instance, the Bambara phrase to refer to both excision and circumcision is *bolokoli* "to wash one's hands." The idea of the "bath" in *Efuru* may also obliquely refer to an anaesthetic such as "the very cold water" that "numbed the skin, making it less painful during the operation" in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *The River Between* (Wa Thiong'o, 1965, p. 23). The narrator in *Efuru* also occasionally mentions the phrase "female circumcision" to refer not only to the removal of the prepuce of the clitoris but also to excision *per se*, i.e. "the removal of the prepuce of the clitoris, the clitoris itself and all or part of the labiae minorae, leaving the labiae majorae intact" (Koso Thomas, 1987, p. 16). Nwapa is thus here referring to the ritual operation of clitoridectomy, a decade before the Nigerian journalist Esther Ogunmodede (1977) spoke out against the practice and definitely before the phrase "female circumcision" came to be used outside of its narrow range to cover all practices (i.e., circumcision, excision, and even infibulation).

"Female circumcision" is here coincidental with the in-passing method, which, while being innocuous, reinforces the status of the practice as an immutable rite. The sister of Efuru's mother-in-law's statement "It is what every woman undergoes" (Nwapa, 1966, p. 15)—points to the fatalistic acceptance of the cult as it is reinforced by culture. Also, the exciser tells Efuru the story of an uncircumcised woman who had a miscarriage, a story, which precipitates the defiant Efuru's subsequent fate as an excised though childless woman, for, if the "bath" did proffer the desired pregnancy, the girl child Ogonim died in her infancy.

The exciser's pronouncement is bitterly ironic in that miscarriage or complications at childbirth feature among the oft-recorded health hazards for excised women. The literary text is here at odds with medical data and recent reports such as the Nigerian case-studies analysed in Efua Dorkenoo's *Cutting the Rose* (Dorkenoo, 1994), which records an impressive panoply of such hazards, including death for the excised woman or child. Ivorian Fatou Keita's *Rebelle* (1998) is, along with Senegalese Aminata Maiga Ka in *La Voie du Salut* (Ka, 1985), the first novelist to record "death-by-excision" in a negative light.[3] The fact that the 11-year-old Ivorian girl child dies as a result of extensive haemorrhage in a Paris setting also propels the account of excision into the literature of exile. Also, by considering the imprisonment of the parents, the novel shows it is attuned to recent debates in France about the criminalization of excision brought about by the revision of Clause 229-10 of the French Penal Code.

In Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman At Point Zero* (1975), the ritual is not only mentioned *in passing*, as in Nwapa, but also as an obscure parenthesis. Firdaus' excision, on her mother's orders, constitutes the first of violent traumas, which augurs the subjection of Firdaus' prostituted body to the violence of numerous male bodies. The bracketed experience, however, resurfaces in a harrowing scene, in which Firdaus plunges a vengeful knife into her pimp, slicing through the flesh, as an exciser would.[4]

The practice of excision can also be highlighted in the text so as to further ground the rite as a factor of social cohesiveness. The Kenyan women-writers' third-person narratives—Rebecca Njau's one-act play *The Scar* (Njau, 1965), Muthoni Likimani's *They Shall Be Chastised* (Likimani, 1974), Miriam Were's *Your Heart is my Altar* (Were, 1980)—as well as Charity Waciuma's autobiographical *Daughter of Mumbi* (Waciuma, 1969) all herald, in Jean F. O'Barr's words, "a positive view of [female] circumcision as a social practice" (O'Barr, 1987, p. 62). This "positive view" of

excision has to be understood contextually, as these novels were written in the wake of then Kenyan president Jomo Kenyatta's championing of the practice in *Facing Mount Kenya* (1938), but before his successor Daniel Arap Moi issued an administrative decree against (rather than banned) the ritual surgery in 1982 when he learned that 14 girls had died.

Understandably, Kenyatta considered *irua* in boys and girls as a source of cultural and ethnic (e.g., Kikuyu) identity and a form of resistance against missionary societies in East Africa. In *Red Strangers* (Huxley, 1939), Elspeth Huxley presents the reader with two factions: the "Men of God" who, invoking Christian tenets and the authority of King George, outlaw the circumcision ceremony on the grounds that it is "cruel and wicked" (1961, p. 347) and the adherents to a Nairobi-based revolutionary party who believe in a European conspiracy to "destroy the Kikuyu people" by encouraging women not to undergo circumcision and therefore be "unclean" and "barren." The Kikuyu retaliation against the British missionaries is pictured as extremely violent, because fathers are urged "to refuse the missionaries' oath, but to take another, no less solemn, pledging themselves to have their daughters circumcised in the fullest and most thorough way" (1939, p. 349). The ban on clitoridectomy indeed provoked, in 1931, the allegedly forcible excision and subsequent murder of the female missionary Hilda Stumpf, who was identified as *irugu* or uncircumcised woman.[5] Although Huxley does not mention her by name, she refers to a "European woman," who emboldened Kikuyu girls to take a stand against "circumcision" and thereby defy the law of the fathers. As a result, she got "crudely circumcised in the Kikuyu fashion" (Huxley, 1939, p. 355) and died in her bed from the wounds. This serves as a powerful instance of "reactance" (Mackie, 2000, p. 277) and of the way colonialism served to perpetuate tradition as a means of resisting cultural incursions and denigrations of African societies. Excision is here no longer mentioned *in passing* or bracketed, but made part of the overall entexting of the female body as the site of colonial conflict between the European imperialists and African societies. In Ngugi's *The River Between* (1965), the female body became a battleground in the clash between conservative Kikuyu traditionalists and the new converts to Christianity. Yet Ngugi's Muthoni dies at peace, as she is, after her excision, "a woman, beautiful in the manner of the tribe" (1965, p. 53). The female "body in pain," to use Elaine Scarry's apt phrase (Scarry, 1985), is evacuated by war or by a premature death, the way the excised female body was metaphorically aligned with a feminised war-torn Beirut in Accad's *L'excisée* (1982).

By the early 1980s, as the Minority Rights Group Report of 1983 holds (in McLean & Graham, 1983, p. 3), the fact that even female infants undergo the operation indicates that the practice of excision is no longer linked to initiation into adulthood. In other words, excision is no longer a *rite* of passage, let alone a *rite tout court.* "Female circumcision" has now been discarded as a "misnomer" (James, 1994, pp. 5–6) and ousted by FGM (Female Genital Mutilation), for it presupposed an equivalency to the male initiation ritual of circumcision, which is inaccurate and provides an interesting exemplar of "dissymmetry embodied" (Bal, 1988). However, "mutilation" has been thought to pre-empt moral judgment about such operations and to comfort an already hegemonic discourse about the "bodies of third-world women," as Therese Saliba (1995) proprietorially puts it, except that these same "third-world women" were to increasingly cast the practice as a mutilation in literary texts. At the turn of this century, activists and writers alike speak of "genital surgeries" (Gunning 1992) or, more recently, Female Genital Cutting or FGC.

"Mutilation" is indeed terminologically unstable. It has been used to qualify vindictive deeds as in the 1983 French case whereby a mentally disturbed woman, Danièle Richer, cut off her own daughter's genitalia, which caused the French Penal Code to be revised. Clause 312-3 indeed mentions that the removal of the clitoris on a child constitutes a "mutilation." This new clause on nonritualistic excision, however, served to indict both the (often Bambara and Soninke) parents of excised girls and the exciser as criminals in subsequent Parisian trials. "Mutilation" is also used to qualify various surgeries. Naomi Wolf in *The Beauty Myth* (Wolf, 1990) has gone so far as to call breast enlargement through silicone implants "a form of sexual mutilation" on account of its mangling erotic power and "half a clitoridectomy" (1990, pp. 242–243). This illustrates the tendency in critical discourse to put excision on a par not only with ancestral practices such as

Chinese foot-binding or Indian *suttee* but also all the contemporary Western avatars of "the Surgical Age" such as cosmetic surgery, mammaplasty, weight loss operations ranging from the intestinal bypass surgery to stomach stapling. "Mutilation" is also used to cover "self-harming," the demarcation line between both being most tenuous, as Germaine Greer indicates in *The Whole Woman* (Greer, 1999, p. 96). Yet, there is a marked difference between a woman performing genital mutilation on herself as a result of schizophrenia, known as the Caenis Syndrome (Goldney & Simpson, 1975), and a woman writer voicing her dissent with the way her culture is evoked to modify her body irreversibly. As we shall see, just as "female circumcision" as a rite was coincidental with the *in-passing* method, "mutilation" is coincidental with the autobiographical impulse.

Although Charity Waciuma's autobiographical *Daughter of Mumbi* (Waciuma, 1969), set against Kenya's Mau Mau Emergency, portrays the tribulations of a Christianized, uncircumcised woman, the very genre Waciuma used hints at the need for women to write experientially the lived body. Her body is unmarked and unscarred, but has been hypocoristically devalued as that of "a child" in the oppressive Kikuyu body economy (pp. 61–62). Women have reached the point where they are frankly "getting personal" (Miller, 1991).

AUTO(-)BIOGRAPHY

Although being aware of such notions as "autofiction" (Doubrovsky, 1988), "surfiction" (Federman, 1975), "postmodern autobiography" (Sukenick, 1988), "global novel" (Hong Kingston, 1977), "nouvelle autobiographie" (Robbe-Grillet, 1984), "autogynography" (Brée, 1978), "biomythography" (Audre Lorde, 1982) or even "fiction autobiographique postcoloniale" (Rachid Boudjedra, 1989),[6] I have here stuck to the rather simple term "auto(-)biography" as the experiential writing emanating from "the lived body" and the intimate realm of the "myself," compounded by a spectral but creative "we." The shift to what might be called the "autobiographical manifesto" (Smith, 1993) is to be located in the part entitled "The Mutilated Half" in *The Hidden Face of Eve* (1980) by Nawal El Saadawi, who was the first African woman to face the issue head on. *The Hidden Face of Eve* displays all the qualities of the "autobiographical manifesto": "Purposeful, bold, contentious, the autobiographical manifesto contests the old inscription, the old histories, the old politics, the *ancien régime*, by working to dislodge the hold of the universal subject through an expressly political collocation of a new I" (Smith, 1993, p. 157). The old inscription is here the indelible marking of the body, which women are going to transform by scripting pain onto the blank page.

"The Blank Page," the short story by Isak Dinesen (1957), provides an interesting history of female autobiography, which is often "belittled by the canon because of its alleged essence as a *process* rather than the conclusion to some *linear development* of the Great White Man Tradition" (Smith, 1993, pp. 2–3). Along the corridors of a Spanish convent hang the framed wedding night sheets of aristocratic marriages, marked by the blood of defloration. And Smith (1993) argues: "These very sheets maintain the genealogy of the landed families, testifying as they do to patriarchal values fulfilled, to female sexuality penetrated, appropriated, and framed. Accompanying the sheet is the princess's name. Both name and stain interchangeably mark female identity and destiny." These autobiographical sheets tell the same story, row after row, wall after wall, frame after frame—until **the blank page** and it is "in this blank space/page that woman's autobiographical fabrication becomes possible" (Smith, 193, p. 3). Whether resulting from defloration or excision, the blood on the sheet serves as the metonymic marker of "woman."

This is especially relevant to El Saadawi's "The Mutilated Half," because she contests the forcible "old inscription" of excision in the early construction of her gender. This is how her self-narrative starts:

> I was six years old that night when I lay in my bed, warm and peaceful in that pleasurable state which lies half way between wakefulness and sleep, with the rosy dreams of childhood flitting by, like gentle fairies in quiet succession. I felt something move under the blankets, something like a huge hand, cold and rough, fumbling over my body, as though looking for something. Almost simultaneously, another hand, as cold as rough and as big as the first one, was clapped over my mouth, to prevent me from screaming. (El Saadawi, 1980, pp. 6–7)

This passage illustrates the abrupt transition from sound sleep to the nocturnal alarum, from childhood to adulthood, from the fairy tale to the harsh reality of women's condition. The body of the girl-child is invaded by one lonely icy-cold hand and followed by a myriad of adult hands, which carry the girl's body to the bathroom, where the operation is forcibly performed. The reader is then confronted with a whirl of anonymous limbs and with the adult Nawal's mnemonic rehearsal of the trauma: unknown voices; the mother's complicity in the gory ritual in an ironic comment on blood ties; the sound of metal that conjures up, in the girl-child's mind, the sharpening of the knife for the sacrifice of the lamb before the *Eid*, the 4-day festival following the month of Ramadan; and this other festival of sacrifice, a month and a half later, the *Eid al Adha*, which introduces the idea of repetition.[7] And the "sacrifice" is repeated when her sister is excised a few moments later, thereby initiating aesthetics of repetition, which is also inherent in the process of remembering, for to remember an event is to experience it again:

> They carried me to bed. I saw them catch hold of my sister, who was two years younger, *in exactly the same way* they had caught hold of me a few minutes earlier. I cried out with all my might; No! No! I could see my sister's face held between the big rough hands. It had a deathly pallor and her wide black eyes met mine for a split second, a glance of dark terror which I can never forget. A moment later and she was gone, behind the door of the bathroom where I had just been. The look we exchanged seemed to say: "Now we know what it is. Now we know where lies our tragedy. We were born of a special sex, the female sex. We are destined in advance to taste of misery, and to have a part of our body torn away by cold, unfeeling cruel hands." (El Saadawi, 1980, pp. 6–7; my italics)

The potential for an infinite rehearsal of the practice as well as its immutability lie in the words "*in exactly the same way*"—which shows that the rite is inexorably passed on from sister to sister (most often through peer pressure) and from mother to daughter.

In Nawal El Saadawi's recent autobiography *A Daughter of Isis* (El Saadawi, 1999), the "sacrifice" of her body is rendered in Judeo-Christian terms: "[they] pinned me down by the hands and feet, as though crucifying me like the Messiah by hammering nails through his hands, and feet" (1999, p. 63). This description is doubly subversive in that, on the one hand, the crucifixion of Christ is denied by the Koran (Sura 4A. 155-17) and, on the other, the body of Christ is sacrilegiously superposed with the young girl's nubile body. Insofar as an autobiographer is always a skilful self-censor, the two renditions of the same scene in *Eve* and *A Daughter of Isis* are mediated by memory as a "meaning-making" "sift," as Harold Rosen recently redefined the autobiographical memory (Rosen, 1998, pp. 102–103). Possibly, they also reflect El Saadawi's increasing catering to a Western, Judeo-Christian readership. Speaking from her private memory, El Saadawi also invites other excised women, other "mutilated halves," to remember and rehearse this painful fragment of their history. In *The Hidden Face of Eve*, as in *A Daughter of Isis*, the "I" gives way to a sororal "we."

In Kesso Barry's autobiographical tale, *Kesso, a Fulani Princess* (Barry, 1987), Kesso breaks with the African, masculinist conception of autobiography and substitutes a community of women, starting with her own daughter, in an attempt to oust the lineage of male ancestors. Kesso recalls how, at 12, she underwent the ritual of excision and witnessed her casually discarded clitoris tossed away for ants to feast on. She later experiences defloration, which, because the nuptial sheet remains unmarked despite her virginity (*Kesso* in Pulaar means "virgin"), will be called a "mutilation" (1987, p. 160). "Mutilating" therefore qualifies both defloration and excision.

Later, Kesso's (second) marriage to a wealthy Frenchman, leads to her willful exile in Paris, where it is intimated that she will spend the rest of her life. Kesso, however, spares her daughter the ritual and therefore breaks the pattern of repetition passed on from mother to daughter. Malimouna in *Rebelle* (Keita, 1998) follows the same itinerary but returns to her native land, Ivory Coast, and heads a women's association to help ban excision. The Peuhl, Senegalese-born writer Mariama Barry, in *La Petite Peule* (2000), resolves to fight "to be the only sacrificed victim of [her] family" (Barry, 2000, p. 23) after she describes her brutal excision at 7, when the matron sat with all her weight on her fragile body and forcibly main-

tained her thighs open while she struggled to escape the "slaughterhouse" (2000, p. 13).

Like the Egyptian who decides in *L'Excisée* to live to help her sisters ("Il faut que je vive pour aider mes autres soeurs" [Accad 1982, p. 170]), both Keita's rebellious Malimouna and Mariama Barry's little Peuhl break with the earlier idea of "sisterhood in pain" and artfully transform it into global sisterhood against excision. So did Somali supermodel and UN-ambassador against excision Waris Dirie in her autobiography *Desert Flower* (1998). After "having surgery to open the crude scars of [her] genitals so that [she] could urinate properly" and later deliver her child, Waris Dirie deems herself "the lucky one," for "[her] circumcision also plagues millions of girls and women throughout the world. Because of a ritual of ignorance, most of the women on the continent of Africa live their lives in pain." In advocating that "somebody must *speak out* for the little girl with no voice" (1998, pp. 224–225), Waris Dirie comes full circle with the Senegalese Awa Thiam's pioneering *Speak Out, Black Sisters* (Thiam, 1986). Yet, her assertion is an egregious instance of collapsing a myriad of social formations into one essentialized "Africa," where it follows that patriarchy reigns and punishes all women all the time.

The *repetition* inherent in the perpetuation of the excision ritual, what Freud (1953b) called, in the Oedipal context, *Wiederholungswang* or the "compulsion to repeat," is also at work in the short story "Against the Pleasure Principle" by the Somali writer Saida Hagi-Dirie Herzi (1992). Herzi is herself excised, but has transposed the experience of excision onto the character, Rahma, in some sort of "autobiography in the third person" located in what Paul De Man (1979, p. 921), after Genette (1972, p. 50), has called that *whirligig* (Fr: *tourniquet*) between fiction and autobiography, a distinction that will be abandoned altogether by William Spengemann in *The Forms of Autobiography* (Spengemann, 1980).

The excision scene in Herzi differs from Saadawi's in that musical instruments here replace the dull, chorus-like voices in El Saadawi's text (1979, p. 6). The expert slitting of the lamb's throat (El Saadawi, 1980, p. 7) gives way to the screaming of the "rabbit when the steel trap snapped its legs" (Hagi Dirie Herzi, 1992, p. 779). Also, the girl-child's acute vigilance in El Saadawi is here dissolved in Rahma's salutary fainting. The absence of local anaesthetics in El Saadawi and the cooling of the girl's genitals "with a mixture of *melmel* and *hildeed*, a traditional medicine" (Hagi Dirie Herzi, 1992, p. 779) in Herzi confirm that El Saadawi's text is hardcore as opposed to Herzi's version, which is softcore, anaesthesized, asepticized. Yet, Herzi's short story was published in 1990 in *Index for Censorship*, for fear that it might fall under the shears of the censor. What is more, it foregrounds in graphic detail the most extreme form of excision, i.e., infibulation:

> Then she must have passed out, for she remembered nothing further of the operation in which all the outer parts of her small genitals were cut off, lips, clitoris and all, and the mutilated opening stitched up with a thorn, leaving a passage the size of a grain of sorghum. (Hagi Dirie Herzi, 1992, p. 779)

Suturing stitches are like notches in evaluating genital beauty: "There are accepted standards for the size of a girl's opening: an opening the size of a grain of rice is considered ideal; one as big as a grain of sorghum is acceptable. However, should it turn out as big as a grain of maize, the poor girl would have to go through it *a second time*" (Hagi Dirie Herzi, 1992, p. 779), which is what happens to Rahma's sister in Herzi's story. The "sister" motif is very present in experiential texts on excision: the "sister" is an accomplice "body in pain." Beyond the grain of maize in this genital hierarchy lies the gaping vulva, which is, notably in Sudan and Somalia, where Herzi hails from, the worst form of insult for a woman.

In *The Whole Woman* (1999), Germaine Greer has highlighted the cosmetic dimension of infibulation because the genitalia are depilated to the point of becoming "virtually invisible" (1999, pp. 96–97). But this absence also reveals the ghostly presence of the phallus. As Michel Erlich has argued (1986), infibulation also contributes to the masculinization of the vulvar concavity into a convex zone evoking "un phallus phantasmatique" (1986, p. 14). The suturing leaves a very small orifice to permit the flow of urine and menstrual discharge. And this formidable seal, which veils the urethra and most of the introitus of the vagina, acts as the guarantor of virginity, which will have to be "broken into" to allow for penile penetration, at times with a wooden replica of the penis carved by the bride's mother before the wedding night.

The premise in Herzi's story is that infibulation cuts women apart from pleasure: "Intercourse cannot be much fun for someone mutilated like that. Perhaps that's why they do it, to make sure the women won't get any pleasure out of sex" (Hagi Dirie Herzi, 1992, p. 781). Herzi seems here to sanction Elaine Showalter's definition of clitoridectomy in *The Female Malady* (Showalter, 1985) as "the surgical enforcement of an ideology that restricts female sexuality to reproduction" (1985, p. 18). But Showalter's statement needs to be qualified if one considers, for instance, the operation that Marie Bonaparte (1924) performed on herself by surgically forcing a closer proximity between the clitoris and the vagina in an attempt to enhance the vaginal (vs. clitoral) pleasure of the frigid "teleclitoride" (1924, p. 768).

Significantly, through its title, Herzi's text engages with Freud's 1919 text "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," i.e., the instinctive drive to seek pleasure, and presents an almost gruesome version of the Freudian "reality principle" of "unpleasure" (1919, p. 10). Herzi's conjuring up of psychoanalysis is not innocent, because Victorian clitoridectomy [Dr. Symington-Brown, according to Sarah Stage in *Female Complaints* (Stage, 1979, p. 77), began clitoridectomies in 1859] benefited from the enlightened complicity of early psychoanalysis in dephallicizing women, i.e., removing the allegedly vestigial masculinity of the clitoris. For Freud, in *Three Essays on Sexuality* and *Female Sexuality* (1905, 1931), the elimination of clitoral, masturbatory sexuality, which corresponds to the phase of "masculine sexuality" in the pubescent girl, was a necessary precondition to access "the essence of femininity" (1905, pp. 220–221; 1931, p. 208).

If excision and infibulation are cast as originating in a patriarchal desire to contain female sexuality within reproductive bounds, such practices also render masturbation impossible, let alone clitoral stimulation by a man or a woman. Katharine Park (1998) dwells on phallic "tribadism" (from the Greek *to rub*) among "macroclitorides," i.e., "penetrating women" with clitorises as large as fingers, and concludes that it has been a source of anxiety since times immemorial but specifically for medical doctors like Ambroise Paré and Jean Riolan the Younger since the 16th century. Theresa Braunschneider (1999) has further investigated the alleged, somatic monstrosity of tribadic sexuality and its construction by 18th-century doctors like James Parsons as "nonthreatening," to which corresponds "the waning of the idea that pleasure is necessary for reproduction" (Braunschneider, 1999, p. 526). For her part, Accad (1992) evokes an "amputated *jouissance*" (1992, p. 95) in the multiple sense of the word, as a result of the forceful removal of the "button of desire" (*bouton du désir*, p. 84) and the subsequent stitching of the labia.

What all texts postulate is that the clitoris is instrumental in providing pleasure and some texts like *A Daughter of Isis* and *Kesso* reassert that Islam is foreign to the unambiguously pre-Islamic practice of excision and that women's sexual pleasure is part of the Koranic agenda. Geraldine Brooks in *Nine Parts of Desire* (Brooks, 1994) even goes so far as to claim that "the lessening of women's sexual pleasure directly contradicts the teaching of Mohamed" (1994, p. 42). Rahma in "Against the Pleasure Principle" concludes: "it was really just an ugly custom that had been borrowed from the ancient Egyptians and had nothing to do with Islam. Islam recommends circumcision only for men" (1994, p. 782). El Saadawi, in *The Hidden Face of Eve*, concurs:

> If God created the clitoris as a sexually sensitive organ, whose sole function seems to be the procurement of sexual pleasure for women, it follows that He also considers such pleasure for women as normal and legitimate, and therefore as an integral part of mental health. (El Saadawi, 1980, p. 39)

In *Rebelle* (1998) Fatou Keïta dwells *a contrario* on the pleasure that can be gained from masturbation, that "dangerous supplement" that Rousseau (1959) had already stressed in his *Confessions.* Autoeroticism is here made possible by the fact that Malimouna, unlike her mangled "sisters," still has her clitoris.

In the experiential writings under scrutiny, the culturally marked body of excised women returns with a vengeance. So do the discarded clitorises, it seems; they come back to haunt us. In Dombi-Fakoly's *La Révolte des Galsénésiennes* (Dombi-Fakoly, 1994), they take the guise of greedy leeches that come back to suck up the blood of the exciser, in her dreams, and avenge her victims (1994, p. 65). This Senegalese *Traumdeutung* augurs the nightmare of the exciser whose deed is now considered

"criminal" under the French penal code. To wit, the many Parisian trials recounted in Martine Lefeuvre-Déotte's *L'Excision en procès* (Lefeuvre-Déotte, 1997). Moreover, the exciser's dream is premonitory in light of Senegal's ban on excision in 1999 and augurs yet another shift, that from excised woman to the female exciser, whose autobiography has yet to be written.

The *vagina dentata* myth, along with "womb-envy," which Bruno Bettelheim (1971) posits as being as strong as penis-envy (1971, p. 173), seem at first to be Western theoretical constructions of female sexuality. Yet, they are also phobias in those African postcolonial societies in which circumcision and excision are designed to remedy the original hermaphroditic nature of both men and women but also, as Awa Thiam suggests, to alleviate men's castration anxieties (Thiam, 1986, pp. 69–77). This is confirmed by such legends from Sub-Saharan Africa as the Somali *griot* Abdi Sheik-Abdi's "Arrawelo: The Castrator of Men" (1988). Excision is here portrayed as men's revenge against the lewd, all-powerful matriarch, Arrawelo, who had castrated all men except for two, one of them being her son-in-law. The latter put an end to her gory reign and ordered all girls to be excised "to render them tractable later in life" (Sheik-Abdi, 1988, p. 96).

The Dogon creation myth from Mali, which Alice Walker has used in *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (Walker, 1992, p. 166), also provides a misogynistic explanation for the ritual. The myth relates how the God of Creation, Amma, tried to rape the female Earth, whose clitoris rose in the shape of an anthill in self-protection. The irate Amma excised the erectile organ, thereby forcing the female Earth and her descendants into subjection. Other legends confirm that mutilation inexorably rhymes with female muteness.

If the practice of excision differs at all in non-Western countries, it is in at least one respect, i.e., the *ritualistic* aspect of the practice, even if the rite is residual. No doubt this aspect helps us assess and understand the distance and interval between feminisms. But, in the extreme case of infibulation, the fact that it is nowhere attested as a *rite* (see Erlich, 1986, p. 26) consolidates the idea of an original patriarchal will to contain female sexuality. Infibulation has the additional merit of being infinitely repeatable through unstitching and restitching, most notably after delivery or a divorce. In Arabic, reinfibulation is called *adla* (tightening) and is, according to El Dareer in *Women, Why Do You Weep?* (1982), mostly performed on those women who have had a previous pharaonic or intermediate circumcision, whereby the edges of the scar are pared and sewn together to create a tight introitus.[8] Primarily, however, suturing, the sewing up of the vagina or the hymen, contributes to the patriarchal enforcement of virginity as a *sine qua non* of marriage and an essential bargaining chip in the community's patronymic extension.

SUTURING

In Ouologuem's sardonic, at times vitriolic novel *Bound to Violence* (Ouologuem, 1971), reinfibulation provides the means of reconstructed virginity after the ruler has "claimed for himself the right of the first night" (1971, p. 47). *La Suture*, an autobiographical novel by Algerian writer Sabrina Kherbiche (1993), posits "the first night" as the last one for the traumatized victim of the *suture*, i.e., the surgical reconstruction of her virginity, enforced upon her as a young woman by her parents in an attempt to save her from shame in their dealings with the promised husband. As a result of the operation, Kherbiche's heroine develops anorexia nervosa and inexorably slides, like her African sister Nyasha, the protagonist of Zimbabwean Tsitsi Dangaremgba's *Nervous Conditions* (1988), into what Maggi Phillips (1994) has termed "a mental abyss where she regurgitates the wrong self with the wrong food, which is characteristic of the paradoxical behaviour of those afflicted with anorexia nervosa" (1994, p. 101).

The process of suturing is also a psychoanalytical, Lacanian key-concept Jacques-Alain Miller (1997–1998) has used to analyse the elements of the logic of the signifier. I have used it here more largely as a third step in delineating the history of the experiential representation of excision to reflect the suturing of disordered discourses, i.e., the collusion of reconstructed virginity and self-starvation. The "lips" in both anorexia and excision are the guardians of the disappearing body; and, somewhat appropriately, Kherbiche's heroine is said to vomit over the black plastic *lips* of a Parisian toilet seat (Kherbiche, 1993, p. 85, my own translation). Rather than vomiting colonial history à la Fanon as in *Nervous Conditions*, Kherbiche's

"I," admittedly the thinnest pronoun in the English language, pours forth in a "bulimia of words" (Kherbiche, 1993, p. 35) her resentment of patriarchy, the ultimate colonizer of the female body. What Anne Balsamo (1995) has termed those "masculinist dreams of body transcendence and masculinist attempts at body repression, signal[ling] a desire to return to the 'neutrality' of the body, to be rid of the culturally marked body" (1995, p. 233), is here given another twist. Kherbiche's protagonist wills her body to disappear, to disincarnate itself as a response to the invasion of her privacy by her husband and her parents in their complicity with the medical establishment. She skilfully manipulates and deceives the intrusive French psychiatric apparatus by hiding from the doctor the "artificial veil" (Kherbiche, 1993, p. 24) in the depths of her body, by refusing to "unveil."

Usually identified as a Western ailment, anorexia nervosa is here simultaneously developed as a tortured response to being wedged between a Western and a non-Western culture (Kherbiche was born of a French mother and an Algerian father) and as a disorder resulting from the double violation of her body's integrity. Kherbiche presents this "second virginity" as a perverted rite and an irreversible mutilation that turns autoeroticism into a muted prayer— "*une prière muette*" (1993, p. 79). The unfolding of her scarred memories culminates in suicide, although the novel's ending is left indeterminate. *La Suture* also projects "the thin woman," after Helen Malson's recent expression (Malson, 1998), beyond the scope of "reading disorders" (Bray, 1996) and "hunger strikes" (Orbach, 1993) usually diagnosed as causing or defining anorexia nervosa. The suturing of seemingly disjunctive discourses is far from seamless, but literary texts are bound to host more of such hybrid, grafted tissues, as the body is becoming increasingly transformable. *La Suture*, however, deals a cruel blow to end-of-millennium ameliorative transformability.

Discursive suturing can also take the form of welding current Western debates on excision with local, African efforts to abolish the rite as in *Rebelle* (1998). Malimouna borrows heavily from Western rhetoric around excision (Keita, 1998, p. 125) to better achieve her aims, and evokes the cultural authority of the film documentary, *Warrior Marks* by Alice Walker and Pratibha Parmar (Walker & Parmar, 1993), who, however, are not named ("*une Noire américaine, écrivain de renommée mondiale*," Keita, 1998, p. 128). One is, however, surprised by Keita's (1998) uncritical acceptance of Walker's neo-colonial crusading in West Africa and her "global womanism" (Grewal & Kaplan 1996, p. 6), to which, incidentally, Folly's *Femmes aux Yeux Ouverts* (Folly, 1998) constitutes an elegant, West African response. Increasingly, in recent writings, "the West" is a discursive ally whose cultural arrogance can be successfully bent to suit the needs of non-Western women. In their first-person accounts, women-writers indeed often seal a feminine version of Lejeune's "autobiographical contract" (1975) with a community of women in an act of worldwide sorority. These various responses, of course, raise the vexed issues of the translation of "international feminism" across geographical and culture-specific borders, but they also help suture various discourses about "whose body is this?" through what Julia Kristeva (1991) has called a politics of touch and intimacy in relation to otherness.

ENDNOTES

1. See, for instance, Stephen A. James (1994). On a penal level, the Togolese woman refugee Fauziya Kasinga demonstrated in 1996 to the American Board of Immigration Appeals that she had good reasons to fear "genital mutilation" in Togo, and she acquired the right to asylum in the United States (*The Guardian Weekly*, 23 June 1996). See also the Italian case, "Bimba mutilata dal padre: a 12 anni ha douto subire l'infibulazione," *La Republic*, 25/9/91. Women's rights activists estimate around 6,000 girls a day across the world are subjected to the ritual. The 1992 Minority Rights Group International Report estimated the number of "circumcised" women to be 74 million—i.e., about one in every 37 women. The most recent UN reports estimate that one in every 25 women, i.e., some 120 million women world wide, have been "circumcised" in varying degrees. According to a government study carried out in 1998, 97% of 14,779 Egyptian women polled had undergone "Female Genital Mutilation."
2. After stating in an interview with Levin that "she felt that the western media tended to exaggerate the extent of the problem," Nwapa wrote a letter to Levin confessing that "the practice was more prevalent (and the consequences graver) than she had imagined" (1966, pp. 208–209).
3. I discuss Keita's text along with Aminata Maïga Ka's *La voie du salut* (Ka, 1985) in Chantal Zabus, "De la *saignature*: le corps excisé dans le récit africain contemporain" in *Folie, Absurde, Chaos: l'écriture africaine contemporaine*, ed. Claudette Sarlet (Paris: L'Harmattan, forthcoming 2001).
4. I discuss this scene in Chantal Zabus (1999); see also Assia Djebar's Preface to the French edition of *Woman at Point Zero* (El Saadawi, 1981).

5. For a more elaborate discussion, see James Olney (1973, p. 100) and Carol Sicherman (1990, pp. 63–64).
6. See Alfred Hornung (1997, pp. 221–230).
7. *Eid* comes from *raddada* (II) and *a ada* (IV), which mean "renew," "start again," "repeat." I have discussed this at length in Chantal Zabus (1999, p. 341).
8. Reinfibulation is sometimes also referred to as *Adlat El Rujal* (men's circumcision) because it is designed to create greater sexual pleasure for men. See El Dareer (1982).

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