

Third World Women and the Family

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Excision: Practices, Discourses and Feminist Commitment

Why does excision raise so many controversies in both East and West? Should one look at it globally? Is one wiping out differences by doing so?

In 1975, declared International Women's Year by the United Nations, feminists around the globe mobilized on this issue. This stirred much controversy, debate, and resentment on the part of some African women who saw European and American interference as reductionist and ethnocentric, representing them in racist, misogynistic, backward, inhuman terms, thus reinforcing the stereotypes.

I remember being myself torn apart in this conflict at one meeting of the African Literature Association in Madison, Wisconsin, during those years. I used the term 'mutilation' in my paper and was immediately attacked by one of my African male colleagues for not using the word 'tradition'. The plenary session was split in a heavy debate bringing in the whole audience which got divided along race rather than gender lines. I was very depressed to see the African women siding up with the African men. But in the evening, I discovered one of the reasons behind this apparent division. I had sung one of my compositions on genital mutilation and the pain it causes in women. Some of the African women present there had

tears in their eyes and came to thank me after the performance. They told me the reason they had sided with their men in the morning was because they had to be loyal to them. In front of the West, loyalty was more important than truth, but I was right in denouncing the practice.

With time, I became more aware of the issue of loyalty versus truth, and how it causes women to be split when they should be uniting on these crucial issues (see my discussion of these conflicts in "Sexuality and Sexual Politics: Conflicts and Contradiction for Contemporary Women"). I have also become aware of the importance of music, poetry, testimony, etc. versus strict analysis. As Françoise Lionnet puts it, talking about Saadawi's novel *Woman at Point Zero* and my novel *L'Excisée*: "It is a more effective and convincing denunciation than many pragmatic or political treatises because it allows the reader to enter into the subjective processes of the woman, to adopt her stance."

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feminist quest. She uses the debates surrounding the practice of excision to reexamine the debates on universalism and particularism. Two claims emerge from the debates: those who campaign for the abolition of all such practices on the basis of universal ethics and those who favor respect for the cultural autonomy of African societies and criticize all forms of intervention as "acculturation" to Western standards.

Even though Lionnet tries to "create a relational space where intersubjectivity and reciprocity become possible," there are some problems with her analysis. For how can there be "convincing denunciation" without "value judgements" and "without necessarily finding solutions"? Is there not a contradiction here? Can one unveil an upsetting aspect of oppression without trying to find a solution? How can one manage to only discuss it and not become committed to changing it? Furthermore, she says that "when Saadawi denounces those practices, she puts herself in jeopardy. By appealing to universal human rights, she attempts to build bridges across cultures, showing the validity of a 'Western' mode of analysis that allows her to name her subjective experience of pain and to situate it within an intersubjective context." (p.4) How can denouncing genital mutilation be a "Western" mode of analysis? Are Westerners the only ones to have denounced the violation of (w)human rights? Do they have the monopoly over human rights? Lionnet must have been aware of the problem since she put "Western" into quotations, and since, in the final analysis, she claims to have been "interpellated" and led to respond in a way that "universalizes the integrity of the body." To such acceptance, is there not only one step into looking for solutions?

Contraception/Abortion, Divorce, Marriage, Polygamy, Sex, Virginity

Methods of contraception exist in the respective countries of the women interviewed, but the information is not always available. However, a growing number of women use contraception for what they consider as financial reasons, namely restricting births because they cannot afford more children. They also gave the reasons that it was in order to be able to continue to work, or even to have a sex life liberated from some of its problems--unwanted pregnancies. Abortion is forbidden, except in Tunisia, where it is legal. Some clandestine clinics practice abortion at exorbitant prices, and sometimes in disastrous conditions. Otherwise, women have to go abroad in order to have an abortion.

All the women interviewed

declared that in their respective societies marriage was the ultimate goal in a woman's life, that relations between men and women outside of marriage were looked down upon by both family and society, that a woman ought to remain a virgin until her wedding day. However, each of them lives this dictum in a different way. Some make the necessary compromises in order to get married and not live as marginals, others prefer marginality to the compromises they would have to make to get married in spite of the complications it may cause in their lives.

Islam allows polygamy as long as the husband is able to maintain total equality in the treatment of his wives. Thus, men can marry four women simultaneously. Tunisia is the only country with a population with a Moslem majority that prohibits polygamy. Other Moslem countries either follow the laws of Islam to the

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letter in this matter, or try to moderate them, more or less, by constraining the husband to tell his first wife of his decision to remarry. She can then ask for a divorce if she likes. In some places the conditions under which a man is allowed to take a second wife are limited (sterility of the first wife, illness, madness,...). The standard of living of the population in those countries is so low that polygamous husbands are becoming rarer and rarer, but the legality of polygamy allows men who get divorced to remarry and to start their lives over again whenever they want to. This is not the case for women. Men can even complicate and delay the divorce proceedings in order to be able to put off paying divorce costs and reparations due to his wife. This is not to the wife's advantage. Opinions differed among the women interviewed: some told us that polygamy was disappearing, others, however, thought it was on the rise. All of them denounced it.

It seems that, in the societies the women interviewed have come from, virginity up to the time of marriage is always required of women by the family, the husband, etc.. Because of this, couples often have so-called "superficial" sexual encounters, that is without penetration, girls try to have their virginity restored when they receive a marriage proposal after having lost their virginity in a relationship that didn't last. Sometimes there can even be a pregnancy when a girl is still a virgin. Girls' sex lives are clandestine because they do not want their families to know. Relationships between men and women, whether intimate, friendly,

or even (encounters) in the street, are very tense and emerge out of a total absence of dialogue.

Education/Work, Evolution, the Veil/Clothing and Make-up

Girls' education is not always a priority in the respective countries where I interviewed women. Parents and the social environment are still discouraging girls to study. They often only reach elementary school. Many families continue to think that a girl's future is in marriage. In disinherited classes, girls are pulled out of school to help their mothers at home (with housework and the education of the younger children) or to find jobs as housekeepers for wealthier families. This keeps the family from having one more mouth to feed and sometimes even gives it an extra source of income. These girls with no diploma or professional training whatsoever are often badly treated by their employers, exploited, and paid miserable salaries.

Some governments seem concerned about the instruction of their people and have planned enormous budgets to that end. The women interviewed are convinced of the advantages of salaried work. They believe that it gives them a certain independence with respect to their families, autonomy, and the power of choice over their lives. However, they all mentioned difficulties encountered by working women: the double work-day because husbands do not help women with housework. Those who can afford to hire

housekeepers, others have a member of the family at home, a woman (daughter-in-law, sister-in-law, cousin,...) who helps them, or they simply face the difficulties of doing double chores alone. The near total absence of day-care centers is another obstacle for mothers. Finally, the discrimination of women who have the same diplomas, qualifications, and abilities as men is an added problem.

The women had fairly different answers to questions about what they would like to change in their lives if they had the opportunity to do so. Some talked about material problems while others talked about a change in outlook. Some talked about both.

Whatever their age, their social class, their level of education, the condition of women seems to have improved over time.

References

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