

Body Image and Breast Cancer

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Granted, mutilations against women do not take place solely within the context of this disease, but cancer treatment provides the surgeon with all the necessary alibis. Misogyny is rampant in this field, where there are practically no female cancer specialists of note. How long must we wait before there is a commission of enquiry into female mutilations, and not only the excision of young girls, that poster child of cultural difference, but an enquiry into the whole range of mutilations inflicted upon females, excision in the name of custom, mastectomy in the name of cancer, and on-the-off-chance hysterectomies! Jeanne Hyvrard, *Le Cercan* (p. 168)

During my ordeal with breast cancer and its mutilating treatments, the feminist philosopher/writer Françoise Collin encouraged me to carry my analysis further, talk about my relationship to my body, how the mastectomy made me feel. She told me that women were divided between those who loved their bodies and those who negated them, and that I was in between. Before, I felt at home in my body, I felt mutilated, and alienated. Not feeling good about one's body led to sexual problems. Françoise told me I had to analyze all this. It would help other women understand certain things about their bodies and their relationship to it through illness or mutilation. It would help them move forward. Dear Françoise helped me think and carry my thoughts and analysis many steps further.

During the disease and its treatments, my thoughts

went in all directions. Some metaphors described cancer as a struggle, a war. I did not like these images of violence, yet I felt my body was being invaded by foreign elements, cells dividing rapidly, capable of eating all my other cells, thus killing me. It was a frightening thought.

Father died and was buried the day I started to lose all my hair. I felt it was no coincidence that I was losing all of my hair that day. I was mourning my father's death. I was grieving over the loss of part of a past I cherished.

I was in the shower at the Physical Education Building, after swimming with my little flower Zahra, and chunks of my hair started falling out. It was frightening. I remembered when I started reading Dr. Love's book on breast cancer, I could not read about the effects of chemotherapy. It terrorized me. I did not know I would have to go through it! I pulled softly on my hair and it stayed in my hands. Bunches and bundles of hair were falling all over the place and I could see Little Flower looking at all the mess without budging so as not to alarm me. Going out of the Center, I tried to hide my skull and my massacred hair that I had always been very proud of in my life until then.

A few days later, Zahra came to help me shave my head. My anxiety left me with the last pieces of hair being shaved off my scalp. I felt light, free, with noth-

ing on my head. Petite Fleur said I had the head of a baby. It's true; it felt strange to the touch, like infants' heads. It was soft, bizarre in a way hard to describe, a strange sensation, it undulated.

Bettina: The image of a baby's head is very beautiful. It suggests that life is being offered to you again. It is like a rebirth.

My body started reacting to all the drugs I was taking. My breast was stinging and hurting. The tumor continued to react and got smaller. I learnt some visualization techniques to help it shrink, and hopefully disappear. My wonderful Samira taught me some, and my friend Cindy sent me some ideas and tapes. One of my favorites was where I imagined I was in a light mauve balloon, I felt secure in that place, surrounded with light and quiet. I breathed in deeply the sense of harmony the color and silence provided me with, and breathed out all the toxins I still carried within me. I did that until I felt my body rejecting all the poisons. I got out of the balloon and became a bird sitting on the branch of the tree I could see from the couch where I was lying. I felt free and ready to fly above the clouds. Did these techniques really work or were they just wishful thinking? At any rate, they helped me relax and gave me the illusion that my will could have a certain effect on my body, thereby having control over my disease.

With chemotherapy, my body started changing and I had no control over it. I was blowing up, my stomach was getting big and I lost almost all of my pubic hair, and all of my hair. Even my eyelashes were beginning to fall out. I felt different, and I didn't like what I saw. So I used all kinds of subterfuge to look pretty, like wigs, scarves, make-up, different clothes. And many people thought I was in great shape. If only they could see what was under it all and how I felt! But it helped me to have people compliment me on my "good looks," because I found it hard to deal with the aggression my body was suffering, its breaking down, and how terrible I thought I actually looked.

I had thought that my breast could be saved thanks to the chemotherapy which was supposed to make the tumor shrink to a sizeable dimension to only do a lumpectomy. So when I went in the operating room, I did not know if I would wake up with my two breasts. Later I learned that my surgeon, Dr Koty had tried to do a lumpectomy. But when he sent the tumor to the lab and they told him there were too many positive tissues around it, it was time to make the decision. He took into consideration that he had already removed a quarter of my breast anyway, closed the incision and performed the mastectomy. From then on, I belonged to all my sisters who had been breast-mutilated.

Amazons crossing Amazonia, one breast cut off, the other flowing freely in the wind.

My breast offered in sacrifice to the gods of modern civilization, Dr. Koty trying in vain to save it. Unsuccessful! Failed operation! Admirable surgeon doing his best, willing to listen and to talk, trying to give answers, admitting when he did not know! But seen from my end of the scalpel, he was no more than a particularly expert butcher, or one of these high priests who used to sacrifice their victims according to certain rites.

Then came the radiation treatment. What was hard with it was the relentlessness of it, every day. I could never stop thinking about it. It was always in my mind no matter what I did. Everyday, I had to go under those machines, one of which made a grilling noise as if it were burning my skin. One day, I cried my eyes out. I did not even know why, and to see my mutilated breast made me cry even harder.

While I was receiving the treatment, I thought of the male technicians looking at my chest, not even androgynous since I did not have a nipple, a chest mutilated by civilization. And I thought: "Here is a chest excised of its sexuality, a chest whose element of desire has been removed." I felt it was very difficult to be so hyper-aware of all this. I yearned for some release, not to dwell on it all the time, to be more trusting of doctors and medicine.

When I was under the first machine, I saw these two eyes looking at me, two red eyes in the middle of a cross, lights that stroke lightning bolts into my mutilated body. Before, I used to be proud of my body, now I saw it mutilated, stitched up, mended. In the other room, the machine was making grilling noises, the electrons penetrated my body, grilled my skin, made my teeth grind.

I hated the Polaroid pictures that the radiation technicians took of me and put in my records. They looked like concentration camp pictures. I looked like a deportee, a number in many concentration cases. Holocaust analogies kept popping up. I had huge scars that appeared disproportionate. I was fed up with the treatment.

I looked at my chest. On the right side, I still had a soft, tender breast, on the other, my skin was red and burnt. I was angry! I should not have taken the estrogen, the hormones that inflamed and activated whatever good and bad cells lied dormant in my body.

Fortunately, I had some wonderful friends surrounding me with their love and care. One of them, a photogra-

File

pher, Eva, from Sweden, came to visit me. We spent some wonderful moments together. She took amazingly sensitive and powerful pictures of my mutilated chest, of my wound, of the scar that was healing, of the markings of radiation, of my whole self as it expressed the Calvary I was going through. It was extremely therapeutic to have her photograph me, share with her the statement I was trying to make through my wounded body, my bleeding soul, my fears over this body I did not recognize, and my desire to have the world know about it, about what this civilization did to people, to women in particular. It was a way to control my anxieties and fears, to say: "Look at me. I am here. This is what you did to me, how your poisoned civilization poisoned my breast, invaded my whole body with its mad cells." I thought of all these women: Eva's aunt, the dean of her university... so many of them with disabled arms because of breast cancer. It was awful, the way their arms swelled, how Eva's aunt had lost the use of hers. She had to use her other arm to move it around, lift it, carry it, change its position. I had never heard of this phenomenon before. Why were women so quiet about their suffering? I was discovering a whole world I'd never known before, a world of pain and silent suffering, a world of tears well hidden, a disease still killing one fourth of its victims, unchanged statistics in spite of all the claims of progress in that domain.

Eva's pictures helped me overcome the imbalance and anxieties I had over my body. Through them I was able to say: "I am here, mutilated, without hair, with a big scar, with markings all around the scar, yet I am beautiful, I am not afraid to look in the eye of the camera and express what I feel!"

But some people found it difficult to look at these pictures. It saddened me that Rose could not bear to look at them. I told her to see such pictures, could be useful for her art (I was thinking of Eva who took them and the artistic statement she was making). And it hurt me that some people told me they could not sleep after seeing them and that I should not show them because they were disturbing. Why this hiding from life's painful realities? Was I like that before I got ill? Did I avoid looking at suffering? I didn't think so, but it's true that looking at suffering took on a different meaning for me then.

[Thinking more about it later, I remembered that actually, I had refused to look at Resa's reconstructed breasts when she had offered to show them to me in Paris twelve years before, at the hospital where she was recuperating after the operation. It is strange how one changed with time and life's experiences and how easily one forgot one's reactions. This is why it was good to be keeping a journal and write down what was happening every day, as much as possible.]

Jane: People find these pictures disturbing because we are raised to look at sexy pictures of perfect breasts on perfect bodies, or artists' paintings and sculptures of an ideal body. We're therefore uneasy when looking at a photograph of "ugly" but perfectly healthy bodies, let alone a photograph of an unhealthy or mutilated body. Our society has a low tolerance of any representation of imperfection. (My mother had her teeth "fixed" not because there was anything wrong with them, but because they did not look good in our family photos!!) This is why Diane Arbus's photos are so startling. She often photographs so-called freaks of nature, the insane, the very marginal.

One of Nadia Tuéni's poems (that she translated herself for the *Chicago Tribune* of July 15th, 1982. Nadia died in 1983) also helped me come to terms with my mutilated self. The poem is taken from July of my Remembrance, a collection of poems assembled in 1991 as a "souvenir album, Nadia's gift to her 'house of the zodiac': born Cancer, she offered, for reasons not unknown, her last poem to July." (editors' note, p. 4):

A body whole, unscathed,
is beauty to behold.
Beyond the final gasp
my life goes on, resisting
like a sun many times dead.
So open wide the window;
let in the sounds of night.
They shall be my bier,
they shall be my shroud.
On Lebanon draw down the shade.
Let just the memory remain
which, mingling with the air,
brings back my short-lived prime.
Let the mountain on me spread
its gravel, wind and thyme.
A name I shall become, imprinted on the shore,
and for you, sometimes, that butterfly of night
whose soared wings crackle from the scorch of light.
(p. 31)

I found it difficult to live with my mutilated body. When I wore a prosthesis, it hurt because it was heavy; it rubbed and scratched my skin, and when I didn't wear it, my clothes all shifted on that side. My body was completely imbalanced. I thought about my body, of how it was before. I used to like the way it looked. I lived with two breasts for more than 35 years, now one side of my chest was breastless like in my childhood, but nippleless also. To learn to live with such a drastic change was extremely difficult. Even when I told myself that worse things could happen, I still could not adjust. I saw my body as if it were masculine on one side because lacking a breast (not even masculine since

there is no nipple and there is a scar in place of a breast) and on the other, my breast which reminded me of the one I was missing—android body? There was also my hair: it was growing back frizzy, woolly. I did not like the head I had.

At times, I felt old. How could the relationship one had with one's body change in less than a year? Things really did not progress slowly or subtly where hormones were involved. I cried over lost time, even though I had already achieved quite a bit in my life. Why was I so traumatized?

On a trip going to Beirut, I watched a fashion show on the television screen of the plane. I felt I would have liked to see the catwalks full of models in ultrachic clothes but with only one breast, in defiance of this civilization which gave me this horrible disease! I was sure it did! In defiance of accepted normal fashion. I had always been a rebel and I recognized those who were like me. I believed in rebellion. I thought it was healthy. It helped one grow, mature, create, not follow blindly, like sheep.

Was my breast acting out? Would the other act out, too? Why did breasts react to the environment like this? Was it that extra sensitive space that pollution stirred? Why didn't all breasts react to it? Why only one in seven? Was it like everything else in human nature, some more sensitive than others? Was it good to be so sensitive when it could lead to death? Could one be sensitive, creative, yet not be threatened with madness and death?

We were approaching Beirut. Soon we would land. Night was falling over Beirut. Beirut, magic city. Beirut, sensitive city, close to folly and death so many times. Beirut eaten up by a cancer, a devouring war over which it triumphed. Beirut, city of my childhood and adolescence. I missed Father, Father who would not be there to greet me with that broad smile of his. Father who tormented me during my childhood and adolescence only to apologize later and tell me I was an overly-sensitive child, he should not have been as strict with me as he had been. I cried over the loss of Father and the loss of my youth.

In Beirut, the hairdresser who came to do Mother's hair told me he was used to seeing hair that turned out like mine due to cancer treatments. It was radiation, particularly, that made it curly in this strange, electric way. In Arabic he told me that *kahraba* (electricity) brought *kahraba*. I had not believed it when people had told me hair reacted differently to these treatments, hair that used to be curly became straight and straight hair turned curly. I thought they were old wives tales. And I could tell people thought I was

making it up when I told them my hair was not curly like that before. In fact, I was having a hard time accepting my head because my hair was in an in-between state that I didn't really like, and its woolly texture disturbed me.

[Jane and others loved my hair this way, especially as it was in Tunis the summer of '95; Jane said that I looked angelic! But I had a hard time with it. Why was it more important how one felt about one's look instead of what people said?].

The Beirut hairdresser told me there were two kinds of cancer: the feminine and the masculine, the feminine was much more virulent than the masculine. It was very aggressive, a real killer. I pondered over his remark: gender differences applied to illness. I had always been interested in gender differences. It was the subject of one of my books. In it I studied how gender differences were closely linked to war. Sexuality and war were interconnected. This popular image of cancer reinforced my analysis in showing that the fear men had of women was manifested even in their portrayal of disease. The female brand of a disease (was there any such thing scientifically?) was much more dangerous than the male one? It killed faster. Where did the idea come from? Was it because of the rapid, mad division of cells? Why would that be more female than male? I wonder if I would find other notions like that, popular sayings, proverbs, folktales and what they would teach me about the disease.

Some of the books I read, the lectures I attended, the interviews I conducted, the friends who shared experiences with me, or sent me letters and words of encouragement, helped me come to terms with some of the questions I had in relation to body image and cancer.

I read many books on cancer, one of which was Andrea Lorde's *Cancer Journal*. In it she says that women who have had mastectomies ought to refuse to have reconstruction because if all the women who had been subjected to this mutilation were to march on Capitol Hill, bare-breasted, asking for radical changes in the way the environment is being poisoned, and more money for research on cancer, there would be more awareness and changes taking place. I felt she was so right! Her description of the nurse from Reach to Recovery who came to her hospital room after her mastectomy to show her how to hide her missing breast was incredible. She described how these women were trained to be upbeat and come in with clothes that emphasized their breast/prosthesis, hiding the whole tragedy under a normalization of the disease. If you appeared normal, you were normal, everything was OK! I liked

File

her political awareness of the disease and her raising the issues to that level. I felt we had to work on consciousness raising so that society and this decaying world could be transformed.

One day, I went with Ruth to Françoise Collin's seminar. Orlan was presenting a show taped on a video, and telling us about the auto-transformation (she did not want us to call it mutilation) of her own body. The title of her conference was: "I gave my body to art." Some people came for a few minutes and then left. They could not bear to watch a face being cut with knives, scissors, blood being wiped away. I also found it difficult to watch but her analysis, the discourse which accompanied the cutting and fixing of various parts of her body by doctors who had agreed to operate on her, allowed a distancing and a reflection concerning identity and the body (a bit like what I experienced with my mastectomy and which I was able to express during the discussion). Traditional norms of the body's beauty, what art is, or should be, or has become now, the capacity to transform one's body, to sublimate it, were also discussed.

To make it clearer to my readers, Orlan is a woman who made a name for herself by asking willing doctors to perform operations on her, not necessarily esthetically pleasing, like adding little lumps on her forehead above the eyebrows. She asked for the least possible anesthesia in order to stay alert during the operation (she had several operations, transformations of her body, especially her face.) She had people film the whole ordeal, while talking herself through it all. She then would comment on the whole performance, why she did it, why and how she gave her body to art, how it allowed her to express another form of art!

But some of my friends did not like Orlan's show. They found it to be gratuitously exhibitionistic. In their view, she was forcing brutal images down our throats, being violent with us and enjoying it, getting pleasure out of it. It was her own personal "trip" by which she hoped to immortalize herself and go down in History.

One of my friends and colleague, Caryl, who invited to give a talk at her University in the South, told me the story of one of her friends who recently had had a mastectomy of both breasts. She had immediate reconstruction and asked for her nipples to be sculpted into the shape of hearts. She had a celebration inviting all her friends to look at her new breasts with hearts. The story made me laugh.

I needed to hear such stories instead of having people start crying when they saw me, or feel sorry for me,

or act as if I had been hit by a plague or a curse to be warded off. I absolutely had to see and hear women like Caryl, or like her friends, who struggled for their lives and for the lives of others, for different values, more light and more justice, in this world. As for Caryl, she worked to revive the memory of forgotten women, the memory of the oppressed, women who were suffering. She described and analyzed it in the literature she taught, in her choice of authors she brought out of oblivion, and in her writings where poetry and commitment interweaved. Caryl believed that anger was necessary sometimes; it helped one take charge of one's life.

The novel, *The Multiple Child* by Andrée Chedid had special significance for me in that it dealt with the literal scars of war as it affected the body, and with attempts at covering up such scarring through the use of artificial limbs. Omar-Jo is the multiple child, born of an Egyptian Muslim father and a Lebanese Christian mother. The child had lost an arm during the Lebanese civil war, but he wore his amputation, his bruised stump, with pride. Once in Paris where he had sought refuge, he was offered a selection of artificial limbs to replace the missing arm and aid him in becoming "able" once again, but Omar-Jo turned them down:

With all his body, with all his being, Omar-Jo had summarily rejected the apparatus, the artificial limb that would have been joined to his mutilated but still living flesh. The child had gotten used to his stump little by little. Even the sutures, dissolved now in the closed wound, were part of it. He would forget the member momentarily, so that he could continue to exist and to function better. Yet, at the same time, it must always live in him as the representation of an amputation, of a permanent cry. You couldn't trade that arm for another nor betray its image. Its absence was a reminder of all absences, of all deaths, of all sorrows. (217-18)

Andrée Chedid expresses here what I felt about having my breast amputated, the questions I was asking regarding reconstruction and implants, and the relation I had with my mutilated country.

One day, I went shopping. I saw lots of bras with little pockets to fill underneath the breasts; it lifted and pushed the breasts up. They were called WonderBras (or something to that effect). It was fashionable at the time, it seemed, to show round breasts overflowing the bras. I noticed there were no bras with pockets for prostheses. No consciousness for the disease hitting a tenth of the population! I looked at these bras I could no longer wear, and "wondered", myself!

Jane: *If you have ever watched the Academy Award ceremony for distributing the Oscars every year, it seems to be a contest to see how much breast the actress can get to bulge out her wonderbra without the whole thing spilling over the edge. It's a real engineering feat! A "wonder"! My mother always laughs at the award ceremony of the Golden Globe Awards. She says the only globes the viewer sees are the ones bulging out of the women's dresses.* It is also interesting to note that many of those breasts are in fact implants to make the woman look bustier than nature had made her. I have two friends from my youth who had implants placed in their breasts, after they were already married! Something for their husbands to play with? Something to make them "look sexy" at work or on the street? (As if America had a "street" anymore!!) It's a true mystery to me why anyone would run the risk of implanting silicones in the body just to look like a Barbie doll.

In conclusion, I would like to say that the relationship I had with my body underwent a complete change with cancer. In the past, it was so automatic, I never had to think about it. My body existed as a part of myself, in perfect symbiosis with my self; I never gave it a thought. Everything became different with cancer. I was obsessed with the image of my body, as if it had become something alien to myself. The obsessive fear that my own body inspired in me permeated the book I was writing about it. Yet at the same time, this fear imposed upon me from without, this constant source of uneasiness, was something I categorically refused. If I spent so much time wondering about my body, it was also about the connection between the body, my body, and the world. Our bodies belong to Nature and to society, and society also belongs to Nature. The mutilations that I underwent during my treatment forever lead me back to the same question: where did this kind of aggression come from? It did not cause me to turn away from the world, to turn in upon myself, to regress, but rather to attempt to understand my relationship, my body's relationship, with nature and society. I sought to awaken or re-awaken within myself an awareness of this relation, which the prevailing ideological climate sought to interrupt and divert, in society at large, with all its agents, doctors and others, who repeated that cancer sprang from the individual, whether in his genes or in his mind, that the individual was responsible, that neither the society nor nature had anything to do with it. It was this same awareness that people such as Tubiana, a doctor and writer, sought to shatter by openly combating the idea that there could be anything new where cancer was concerned, demobilizing people by assuring them that those in the medical establishment had their best interest in mind and knew what they were doing. This is how they con-

structed individuals who were completely withdrawn into their own bodies, preoccupied with their bodily functions, having decided that the health care demands placed upon them by their own bodies required that they ignore their connection to the larger world, that they deny their existence as beings-in-the-world, in society. The irony was that this denial came at a time when they were all the more passive as subjects by their persistent refusal of that relationship. In other words, they were reduced to the state of medico-pharmaceutical super-consumers.

Jeanne Hyvrard: What we are questioning is not the ignorance of the species or its powerlessness in the face of disease; we feel no bitterness in that regard. It is rather the fact that we were subjected by a corps of physicians to a barbarian treatment that has left us weakened, without informing us of these effects or asking our opinion. This attitude is unacceptable. What we are questioning is that we were not warned; we were not offered choices (though it is likely that we would have opted for the treatment). (p.174)

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