

BRIDGING THE CULTURAL DIVIDE: A CHRONOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF
FEMALE GENITAL CUTTING IN SELECTED ANGLOPHONE AND
FRANCOPHONE LITERATURE AND FILM

by

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Selected Anglophone and Francophone Literature and Film

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of
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DEDICATION

This is dedicated to all the girls and women all over the world who have been affected by female genital cutting, physically and emotionally.

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I would like to thank everyone who encouraged me to persevere through this effort and to its ultimate completion. My friends and family listened to me ramble about such a difficult topic and helped in times of need. My husband Jamie supported me through everything and provided very helpful input. My two sweet daughters, Josie and Martine were so patient with me spending so much time at the computer. Thanks also to my thesis director, Paula Gilbert, who endured too many desperate late night e-mails and to the rest of my thesis team, Laura Fyfe and Ramonu Sanusi, who took time out of their hectic schedules for this thesis. Thank you to you all.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Abstract.....	vi
1. Introduction.....	1
2. The First Works: Working towards the “Freedom” of the 1960s.....	12
3. Verbal Snapshots of the Face of FGC in the 1970s.....	20
4. The Movement from Awareness to Activism of the 1980s.....	31
5. Literary Activism of the 1990s.....	52
6. Which Way to Go? The Movement Towards Eradication in the 2000s.....	66
7. Conclusion.....	78
Works Cited.....	80

ABSTRACT

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This thesis discusses the impact that selected works of francophone and anglophone African texts have had on the awareness and perception of and the activism against female genital cutting (FGC). By beginning in the 1930s and continuing through 2007, the author discusses the literature and film chronologically by decade. These selected works of literature and film display the complex nature of the practice and of the activism needed for its eradication. In addition to the literature and film research, strategies for the abandonment of FGC were also researched. This thesis is intended for an audience who is interested in studying both fiction and non-fiction literature and film, which focus on FGC and the progress towards the abandonment of the practice around the world.

1. Introduction

As a university educated, young, western woman, I was in a graduate class reading Sénégalaise author and activist, Awa Thiam's compilation of interviews in her corpus, La Parole aux négresses. Prior to this, I had been aware that there was a practice of "female circumcision" that existed in some African countries, but because of the ambiguity of the term, "circumcision," I was unsure what exactly was involved in the practice. Upon reading even a few interviews, my eyes were opened, and I am inclined to say, opened in horror. I remember crying and even feeling sick to my stomach as I read the different accounts of these women and their memories of being cut. I feel that I am representative of many people, who for the first time, began to realize that these women and young girls were suffering because of their communities' cultural beliefs. I felt the desire to put an end to the practice and I knew I was not alone.

For one culture, certain practices are considered justified, important milestones in life, yet for another, these same practices can be considered aberrations. One such example is the traditional practice currently called Female Genital Cutting (FGC), and in different times and varying locales referred to as female genital mutilation, female circumcision, infibulation, and excision. Despite the significance of the evolution of the terminology, the World Health Organization (WHO) defines FGC as, "all procedures that involve the partial or total removal of the external female genitalia or other injury to

the female genital organs whether for cultural, religious or other non-therapeutic reasons” (WHO 6). In 2000 it was estimated that between 100 and 140 million girls and women had undergone FGC and that every year another 2 million will be cut (WHO 2000). Since this number could be upwards of 150 million today, this is indeed a wide-reaching issue, which concerns the entire world.

From francophone authors, but also other European, American and African authors, comes a broad-based body of literary and film works addressing the topic of FGC. Both fiction and non-fiction, these works have not only changed the perception of FGC but also have spurred on a new movement of activism towards the eradication of this practice. Stemming from an awareness promoted by these selected literary works, there has been a movement towards the eradication of FGC which has ended the lives of so many young girls around the world. In analyzing the content of selected literary and film productions throughout the decades, I will examine this controversial issue while considering the various medical, social and cultural beliefs that surround it.

History of FGC

Although FGC had not been discussed in an open manner in many settings until the late 20th century, some believe it can be traced back to the second century BC. Early Egyptian cultures are often cited in sources documented on papyrus as having practiced some form of FGC. In the first century AD, during the reign of the emperor Trajan, a doctor practicing in Rome wrote several volumes of a medical journal entitled, Gynecology. This is one of the first detailed descriptions of the removal of all or parts of

the inner and outer labia and or clitoris (Couchard 15). In the same century, one finds a reference to the Roman Aetius who expressed his approval of the Egyptian custom of the “amputation of the clitoris before it grows large chiefly about the time when the girl is marriageable” (Abusharaf 2).

There is an ongoing debate of whether or not the roots of FGC are actually to be found in ancient Egyptian culture. This debate is not the only source of confusion when talking about the historical aspects of FGC. Its roots also spread into the world of Islam where some have referred to the Hadith as proof, if not the source, of the existence of FGC during the time of the prophet Mohammed. The citation contains a request by Mohammed for moderation in the severity of FGC, rather than a statement of support for the practice of cutting (Lightfoot-Klein 14). In the past decade, many Muslim leaders have stepped forward with proclamations that the justification for the practice of FGC is neither found in the Qu’ran nor the Hadith (Abusharaf 3). In fact, FGC is practiced among many other religions, including Christians, and representatives from most of these groups also speak out against the belief that the practice of cutting began as a religious practice.

Belief Systems Behind FGC

Despite the ambiguous nature of the history and roots of FGC, reasons seem to emerge as to why this ancient practice has continued on into the present day. Among the

28 countries where FGC is practiced¹, there is a wide range of belief systems and ideologies that support cutting away parts of a woman's genitalia (WHO 2000). The practice of removing all or parts of the sensitive tissue including the inner and outer labia and the clitoris is thought by many to control a woman's sexual desire, thus promoting the maintenance of chastity before marriage and hopefully promoting fidelity during marriage. While FGC is not founded in religion, the practice does reinforce some other religious beliefs having to do with sexuality. Attenuating sexual desire and chastity are prescribed aspects of a woman's life in the traditional Muslim faith. The same goes for Christianity, where some believe they will be condemned if they do not attempt to suppress their sexuality by being cut (Lightfoot-Klein 42). From another psychosexual perspective, most cultures practicing different forms of FGC hold fertility as an important contribution from women in their communities. By cutting off parts of their genitalia, it is hoped that by taking the emphasis off of young girls as objects of sexual desire, these females will be primarily seen as future mothers and heralded for their femininity (Lightfoot-Klein 40).

Beyond a concern over female sexual desire is the belief that the different forms of FGC will help maintain good hygiene and render a woman more aesthetically pleasing. Some societies believe that some parts of woman's genitalia, such as her clitoris and inner labia, make her seem masculine, and even hermaphroditic, and for this reason

¹ FGC is reported to be practiced in Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Côte d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Djibouti, Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Kenya, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sudan, Togo, Uganda, United Republic of Tanzania, Yemen in addition to countries in Europe and in North America and in Australia where FGC is reported in the immigrant population (WHO 2000).

should be removed. A woman who has not been cut is sometimes seen as being unattractive and even unclean in societies where FGC is prevalent (Lightfoot-Klein 38).

Even deeper than the physical side of the practice is the sociological basis for cutting. The ceremony itself of being cut is firmly rooted in cultural heritage, maintaining tradition and is, in most practicing societies, thought to be a rite of passage for a girl to pass into womanhood. Women who have not undergone this rite of passage are often rejected by their own communities and families for not having conformed to such an established tradition (WHO 2000).

Types of FGC

Just as there are varied reasons why many societies have continued the tradition of FGC over hundreds and even thousands of years, there are also many different levels of cutting. These types range from hardly invasive to the virtual restructuring of a woman's genitalia. While there have been efforts in some international organizations to group together the variations for the simple ease of discussion, it is important to remember the diversity in the reasons behind these differing types of FGC. Most women who have undergone FGC have been subjected to one of the following types. Type I is comprised of the excision of the prepuce, with or without excision of all or part of the clitoris. Type II is the excision of the clitoris with partial or total excision of the labia minora. The majority of women who are cut, fall under the category of Type II. Type III, also referred to as "pharaonic circumcision," involves the excision of part or all of the external genitalia and the stitching up of the vaginal opening. It is from this type that the

term, “infibulation,” emerges. Type IV is comprised of the pricking, piercing or incising of the clitoris and/or labia; stretching of the clitoris and/or labia; cauterization by burning the clitoris and surrounding tissue (WHO 2000).

While one of the four types is initially performed on younger, prepubescent girls, the procedure is sometimes repeated on mature women. This second cutting and suturing is most common with Type III, or infibulation, and is performed on women who have given birth, been widowed, or divorced. The goal of the re-infibulation is to simulate a “virginal vagina” and to recreate the small opening that was desired before it was “compromised” (Lightfoot-Klein 35).

Consequences of FGC

The consequences of FGC range from an immediate physical reaction to ongoing physical and mental effects felt throughout a woman’s entire life. It is essential to point out that most girls are forced to be cut and are done so without necessary medical precautions and sterilized equipment. Death, excessive bleeding and hemorrhaging, and severe pain and injury to the surrounding area are among some of the immediate consequences. Depending on the degree of invasiveness, long-term consequences can include painful and difficult urination and menstruation, urinary incontinence, infection, occurrence of fistulas, increased risk of the contraction of HIV/AIDS, increased risk of complications during childbirth, pain during sexual intercourse, and a lack of sensitivity in the genital area. Psychological consequences include feelings of inadequacy, anxiety,

depression, and if the woman remembers being cut, various phobias that are directly related to the actual procedure (WHO 2000).

Respectful Perceptions

To many people in the world, the practice of FGC is horrific. A multi-leveled analysis must accompany studying and commenting on one's own and other cultural beliefs. In so doing, one makes an attempt at not being simply an outsider looking down upon another's beliefs, but as an interested party trying to understand the other's beliefs in a multi-faceted way.

Isabelle Gunning has developed such an approach, which I think is vital to my discussion on FGC. By following her standards of cultural analysis outlined in "Arrogant Perception, World-Travelling and Multicultural Feminism: The Case of Female Genital Surgeries," I believe that I can offer a balanced treatment of this subject. By seeking the "improvement in the quality of women's lives and in their status in all the world's cultures," and by maintaining "the respect for the diverse views among women on how these goals will be achieved (Gunning 247)," I intend to follow her three-pronged approach to analysis throughout my discussion of the sensitive topic of FGC. Gunning suggests the following: "1) seeing oneself in historical context; 2) seeing oneself as the "other" might see you; and 3) seeing the "other" within her own complex cultural context" (Gunning 247). By providing this balance of perspective I intend to be respectful of women's belief systems that exist in their own cultures, while stressing the need to protect women's health and wellbeing as a whole.

FGC as Represented in Selected Francophone and Anglophone Literature and Film

During the twentieth century, the francophone world produced and continues to produce many literary works that address the subject of female genital cutting. Because of many factors and despite sporadic increases in numbers, we are seeing an overall decline in the worldwide numbers of women and girls who have been subjected to this practice. International, national, and local legislation, international non-profit organizations, programs of literacy, and grassroots efforts have all contributed to this promising decline. Certain works of fiction and non-fiction that have been published and read throughout the west are representative of an entire body of literature that has also helped increase awareness of FGC and its negative effects on millions of women and young girls. This increased awareness has aided in activism against this harmful practice. Ultimately, success is being found and will continue to be found in transferring both western resources and activism into the hands of the women who are personally faced with this practice. Promoting grassroots efforts in education and legislation should be the goal of the activist along with the victims who have been spurred into action against FGC.

While anthropological texts discussed FGC as early as the 1930s, a sort of “literary call to action” originated in the 1960s with The River Between by the Kenyan writer and social activist, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o. This text represents an African society and mentality that were being influenced by outside Western thought and presence. FGC is one of the central themes in The River Between and marks the beginning of a sort of “literary activism” that takes hold in this post-colonial world.

Ahmadou Kourouma's Les Soleils des indépendances serves as the perfect transition from the 1960s to the 1970s. Published in 1970, Les Soleils des indépendances provides much more insight into the practice of FGC than wa Thiong'o's The River Between. However, they are both written from a male perspective and with an "other's" narrative. The real breakthrough in opening up the discussion of FGC comes with women authors. Progressing into the 1970s one finds a new and much needed trend of literary freedom where the seemingly hidden face of FGC is made known by these female authors and becomes less of a taboo subject. Senegalese feminist author and activist, Awa Thiam, for example, uses personal interviews in both one-on-one and group settings in her book, La Parole aux négresses. For the first time, the reader gets a personal account of both sides of the story of FGC: women who would fight to continue the practice and those who would fight to stop it. Through these first-hand accounts, we begin to understand why FGC continued to be practiced. Pressure not only from the patriarchs, but also from the matriarchs, and even peers, played and continues to play a large role. This decade also marks the first international conferences held where FGC is addressed as a primary topic of consideration.² Throughout the world, people are being spurred to action.

Francophone and anglophone literature of the 1980s often explores dual themes. One such theme is to educate outsiders about the practice of FGC and the themes from the voices of the 1970s are reiterated. Both western writers, Hanny Lightfoot-Klein for

² 1975, was named the "l'Année de la Femme," and many conferences were held which raised FGC as one of many concerns against the health of women. While the UN and the WHO recognized these conferences and saw FGC as a real threat to women, they neglected at this point to make a true resolution (Thiam iv).

example, and non-western writers, such as Egyptians Nawal El Sadaawi and Nayra Atiya, provide pivotal texts in accomplishing this theme of educating the west about FGC. The second theme is represented by women trying to flee their native country where they are threatened with being subjected to FGC. In Lebanese francophone author, Evelyne Accad's L'Excisée, for example, we see both an outsider's perspective of witnessing the practice and the reaction of those who have been cut: in this instance, both try to escape. The 1980s is also a decade where the numbers of immigrants arriving in the west are increasing. Some have left to escape their traditional practices, but others feel they should maintain them in their adopted lands. Countries in Europe, specifically France, but others in the west as well, are forced to face FGC within their own borders.

Activism is a common theme in the 1990s and certain francophone works reflect this trend as being present in both western and non-western circles. Western writers like Martine Lefeuve-Déotte emerge in an activist role by documenting the practice in an anthropological format in the interest of helping women who have been subjected to FGC and who are being punished for subjecting others to FGC in France. Non-western writers like Ivorian Fatou Kéita in Rebelle, demonstrate how individual women are able to make an impact when they are activists against FGC in their own communities.

The new millennium has marked an era of an energized effort by novelists and activists who are pushing for the abandonment of FGC. The difficulty lies in choosing the best method that provides culturally sound means towards the end of this harmful practice while still retaining the beneficial symbolic role of the tradition as a rite of passage. Many authors and editors, such as Rogaiya Mustafa Abusharaf, Ylva Hernlund

and Bettina Shell-Duncan, have published and compiled works devoted to solutions and documented progress towards the end of FGC. The photographic and literary narrative of a young boy from Burkina Faso in Swiss photographer Benoît Lange and Swiss journalist Dominique Voinçon's Cicatrice provides an excellent picture of a rural village. This village, seemingly representative of many African villages of the new millennium is faced with the decision between following new laws against FGC and upholding longstanding traditions. Probably the most effective work of this decade by a francophone creative artist has been the film, Moolaadé, produced and directed by Sénégalaise Ousmane Sembène. This film, while showing the presence of outside influence, shows how it is ultimately the women directly affected by FGC who are the ones with the most power to stop it. There are also several documented cases of various grassroots organizations, mostly funded by international and non-government organizations that have been successful in working towards the abandonment of FGC in that same way.

The chronological journey through these selected francophone and anglophone literary and film productions leads one on a path from discovery and awareness, on to activism, and then on to a refocused activism that places the power to abandon FGC into the hands of the women who are most affected by it.

2. The First Works: Working towards the “Freedom” of the 1960s

The 1960s found European colonies in Africa slowly emerging from the effects of oppressive colonialism and moving towards a sense of reaffirmation, if not reconnection, with their traditions. Among these was the practice of female genital cutting. Even before this decade of change, we find FGC described in anthropological and psychosexual texts written by outsiders. The social and political transition of the 1960s in newly independent African countries brought the development of novels written by those more closely affected by FGC. Since women were not well published at the time, these novels were written by males who used their personal experiences as a basis for their work. In one such novel, Kenyan born, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s The River Between reflects the idea of a postcolonial reaffirmation of beliefs within the context of a cultural rebellion against western influence. Wa Thiong’o presents a male perspective of the traditional cutting practice in the Kikuyu region of Kenya.

Early Anthropological Texts

In looking at FGC in such a literary context, it is important, however, to start with earlier writings that address the practice of cutting. These works should be considered as some of the first building blocks towards lifting the taboo of talking and writing about FGC. The first writings displayed a sort of historical neutrality, where there was little, if any, challenge to or criticism of the practice of cutting. During the 1930s, these writings,

predominantly francophone, mentioned FGC when discussing different African ethnic groups. Specifically in 1937, the Journal de la Société des Africanistes, published Annie de Villeneuve's article entitled, "Étude sur une coutume somalienne: les femmes cousues." This article describes, from a primarily medical standpoint, how an infibulation is performed. Following this article, Sister Marie-André mentions in her 1939 novel, Femmes d'Afrique noire, the procedure, now known to be FGC, that young women undergo in Burkina Faso. While she does not go into any great detail of the procedure that was taking place, she does mention that there are certain risks associated with this practice (Herzberger-Fofana 4:2).³

FGC as Presented in Texts on Human Sexuality

While not specifically discussing FGC as a central theme in these writings, there was a movement in the 1940s and 1950s to write about humans in a sexual context. Preceded by Sigmund Freud, Marie Bonaparte is one such francophone psychoanalyst who discusses FGC from a psychosexual perspective. In her 1949 article, "De la sexualité de la femme" published in the Revue française de Psychanalyse, Bonaparte discusses the practices of the Nandi tribes in Kenya. Specifically, she talks about the Nandi's view that a woman's clitoris, seen as her erogenous connection to childhood, must be removed. This completes the transition to womanhood by transferring a female's erogenous zone from the clitoris to the vagina (Zabus 60). This idea of transference from

³4:2 denotes that this is page 2 of chapter 4 in a pdf document that recommences its page numbering with each chapter.

the clitoris to the vagina as a stage of feminine sexuality was first mentioned by Freud in the early 1940s and later cited by Frantz Fanon in Peau noire, masques blancs. In his 1952 essay, Fanon discusses Bonaparte's article and contributes his own perceptions by saying, "Le clitoris est perçu comme pénis en raccourci, mais, dépassant le concret, la fille ne retient que la qualité" (Fanon 155). Like Bonaparte, Fanon did not express opinions for or against FGC. However, this discussion of a woman's clitoris and its removal in certain cultures was yet another block in the base of literature that would later lead to a more open discussion of the practice.

The Postcolonial Narrative

In the 1960s, another genre of literature emerged, which, among other things, addressed FGC with a more critical voice. Stories were being written about the struggles that went on under colonization. Traditions were put into question and, in many cases, this doubt was overcome by exuberantly professing loyalty to traditions and declaring that the imperialists could not and did not sway them from their beliefs.

Christian missionaries in particular were responsible for repressing many of these traditional practices, with FGC at the top of the list. While trying to work in women's best interest, this attempt to "save these women from themselves" by banning FGC was simply seen by most Africans as demeaning and oppressive. In an effort to recover from this imperialistic oppression, the practice of genital cutting became an even more important part of the postcolonial African culture. In her book, Rites and Rights: Excision in Experiential Texts and Human Contexts (2007), Chantal Zabus specifically

cites this phenomenon when discussing missionary work in Kenya: “It is because of the Protestant missions’ interventions that female *irua*⁴ was put to the fore and was reinstated, at times violently, as part of the phenomenon of reactance to colonization and Christian proselytizing” (80).

The River Between

Francophone African novels had not yet found a forum to express this sentiment of a postcolonial Africa reaffirming its traditions. Anglophone African novels, however, were published and widely read in the western world, thus setting the stage for more open discussions. Very few of these focused on the specific practice of FGC: however, one novel stands out as having FGC as one of its primary themes. In Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s 1965 novel, The River Between, the Gikuyu people⁵ of Kenya are portrayed amidst the dynamics of a new white settlement, bringing with it, Christianity. With this novel, both the internal and external struggles between the western and non-western cultures are introduced to the western reader. This is one of the first of many African narratives where FGC is presented. Although it is written by a male and leaves much ambiguity in regards to the woman’s personal experience of FGC, The River Between begins to lift the taboo on discussing the genital cutting that takes place in one’s own community.

⁴ *Irua* is the Kikuyan rite of passage to adulthood consisting of genital cutting in both males and females (Zabus 37).

⁵ Wa Thiong’o states in a note at the beginning of The River Between that, “the form of Gikuyu is used correctly for the people and language of the Kikuyu area.”

The Honia River in Kenya, set between two ridges, the Kameno and the Makuyu, is the setting of the cultural struggles present in wa Thiong'o's The River Between. The Kameno region is home to Chege, a respected elder and prophet. It is Chege's son, Waiyaki, who is the protagonist of the novel and the embodiment of the struggle between western Christianity and Gikuyu traditions. In the Makuyu region is the Christian settlement of Syriana, led by the preacher Joshua. It is Joshua's daughter Nyambura who becomes a representative of the struggle of the woman who wants to be connected to her own community yet believes in the abandonment of old traditions; she eventually marries Waiyaki. In Rites and Rights, Zabus recognizes Waiyaki as the human representation of "the Honia River, (that) lies between and yet wishes to unite the two antagonistic ridges of Makuyu and Kameno" (50). In the novel, this division between the western Christians and their Gikuyu followers and the Gikuyu who continue to be firm in their beliefs emerges in the presence of FGC.

The white Christian settlers had changed the landscape of the Gikuyu people, and with it, their traditions have been put into question:

Waiyaki watched, thinking confusedly about the school and the country of the sleeping lions. The country could now no longer be called isolated. Since the alienation of all the land in the hills and ridges around Syriana to white settlers, the country of the sleeping lions was like any other part of Gikuyu country. As his father had once told him, the arm of the white man was long. (wa Thiong'o 62)

Waiyaki, while drawn to the Christian influence on other members of his community, still feels a strong sense of loyalty to his own traditions. Among them is the practice of genital cutting. This is a practice that Joshua and his Christian followers condemned; yet Waiyaki and others in his community feel compelled to continue practicing it. Waiyaki describes his own circumcision, known in his tribe as a cleansing, with great detail: “The knife produced a thin sharp pain as it cut through the flesh. The surgeon had done his work. Blood trickled freely on to the ground, sinking into the soil. . . The son of Chege had proved himself” (wa Thiong’o 45).

Both daughters of Joshua, Nyambura and her sister Muthoni are portrayed in juxtaposition to Waiyaki. While Nyambura feels certain that being cut is indeed just as her father says, “a pagan rite” (wa Thiong’o 25), Muthoni is compelled to “rebel” against her father and the white missionaries’ beliefs to pursue her native traditions. As she tells her sister of her decision to be cut, she says, “I want to be a woman. I want to be a real girl, a real woman, knowing all the ways of the hills and ridges” (26). She then continues: “Father and mother are circumcised. . . .Circumcision did not prevent them from being Christians. I, too, have embraced the white man’s faith. However, I know it is beautiful, oh so beautiful to be initiated into womanhood” (wa Thiong’o 26). In trying to reconnect to her own heritage, Muthoni ends up dying from “complications” of her “circumcision.”⁶ Even Waiyaki, who himself was circumcised, questions Muthoni’s

⁶ The term circumcision is put into quotations, as that is how wa Thiong’o refers to FGC in The River Between. This term, while correctly used for boys, is actually incorrectly used for the procedure that is performed on the Gikuyu girls. The clitoris and other parts of a girl’s genitalia are not being circumcised; they are completely removed or excised.

decision to subject herself to such a risk. He expresses this quandary in the shadow of his own circumcision: “What was Muthoni feeling, he wondered. He thought that if he had been in her position he would never have brought himself into such pain. Immediately he hated himself for holding such sentiments. He was of the tribe. He had to endure its ways and be inside the secrets of the hills” (wa Thiong’o 46). With Waiyaki’s words, wa Thiong’o manages to put the paradox of the western influence in contrast with the tradition of genital cutting, both for males and females. Even though it is a tradition to which Waiyaki does not completely subscribe, he knows that he does not want outsiders dictating his own cultural practices.

In a 2004 interview with Michael Pozo, wa Thiong’o discusses his knowledge base that came from his experiences growing up in the same cultures about which he writes in his fictional works. He talked about the importance of being detached in an effort to see clearly: “. . . detachment aris(es) from one’s attachment. A writer or artist has to simultaneously swim in the river and also sit at the bank to see it flow. I am a product of the community and I would like to contribute something to that community” (Pozo 2). Writing from this perspective is important in the development of future literary works, which address, even more closely, FGC as seen in an author’s own context.

While wa Thiong’o’s male perspective of cutting is evident in Waiyaki’s description in The River Between, a female’s experience of being cut is completely different.

Muthoni’s death is a strong and realistic statement of the risks of FGC, but there is a notable lack of detail in the actual ceremony. The complications that arose from Muthoni’s genital cutting are presented in an ambiguous third person narrative: “A shout

and cry mixing with suppressed groans of pain! Women were shouting and singing their bravery. All was over. The new generation had proved itself. Without a single blemish” (wa Thiong’o 46) and “(Muthoni’s) wound, we hear, is getting bigger and worse” (wa Thiong’o 47). Risking an oversimplification of the reasoning behind this, this lack of detail can be attributed to the fact that it is a male narrative.

The River Between was the seminal work of African literature during the post-colonial period. Wa Thiong’o was born and raised Gikuyu, fought openly against British imperialism, and tried to expose the world to realistic views of his culture, yet this story lacks the perspective of a woman. Although he opened doors to a more public forum in which FGC could be discussed, a women’s point of view was much needed. Zabus sums up the literary evolution of the 1930s through the 1960s by saying: “As autobiography frees itself from the hold of cultural anthropology, the anthropological novel, and a full-fledged novel such as wa Thiong’o’s The River Between, the excision rite is increasingly questioned by a new subjectivity. That new subjectivity is female” (Zabus 58).

3. Verbal Snapshots of the Face of FGC in the 1970s

The literature of the 1960s, primarily wa Thiongo's The River Between, which addressed FGC as a central theme, helped begin to lift the taboo of talking about FGC. With that said, there was a noticeable lack of francophone African literature during the 1960s that broached the topic of FGC and even more so in the form of a woman's narrative. In fact, there were few African women to even publish during the decade.

With the new decade of the 1970s came new voices. Some voices, like that of Ahmadou Kourouma in Les Soleils des indépendances, are from males who discuss FGC with much more sensitivity than their predecessors like wa Thiong'o, for example. Awa Thiam's non-fictional feminist treatise, La Parole aux négresses, is the first to give women a platform to express their opinions, for and against, genital cutting. With these voices a bridge was beginning to be built. On one side, women who were victims of FGC felt they could speak out about the practice, and on the other side, westerners gained a sense of awareness of the practice of FGC. From both sides emerged the beginnings of activism towards the abandonment of FGC.

A New Narrative

Les Soleils des indépendances, an important novel published at the turn of the decade, presents the Malinké people of the newly independent Ivory Coast. Himself

Ivoirian, Ahmadou Kourouma, introduces his main characters, Fama and his first wife, Salimata. Both characters are presented as strong people, but each in his or her own domain. In matters of national politics, it is Fama who emerges as the strongest. However, in more private matters of the home, Salimata is the strong one. She is the embodiment of women's suffering as she has been excised, raped, rendered infertile, and must endure accepting a second wife into her family; through all of this, she not only survives, but also does so with grace. The simple fact that women are portrayed as such strong characters, albeit not equal in all areas, makes this novel an important one.

Kourouma's first work gained great acclaim because of the cultural authenticity that is present throughout. In 1978, in the journal Éthiopiennes, Evelyne Lavergne describes Kourouma's writing in her article, "Les Soleils des indépendances et l'authenticité romanesque": "Forces surnaturelles, personnages dominés par le destin, importance de la vie quotidienne et traditionnelle, rôle de la nature et style même, nous plongent dans l'atmosphère des récits traditionnels"(1). Representing Malinké beliefs, Kourouma connects Salimata's memories of her excision, rape, and subsequent infertility with the supernatural, what he calls *un genie*, a sort of spirit that the Malinké believed could take on different forms (Kourouma 38-9). Kourouma's writing closely mirrors the Malinké tradition of oral storytelling and displays his apparent sensitivity to the horrors of the practice of cutting. It is this type of writing that gives his novel credibility as a pivotal text in creating awareness of FGC.

When describing Salimata's excision, Kourouma, narrates from Salimata's perspective: "Dans le sang et les douleurs de l'excision, elle a été mordue par les feux du

fer chauffé au rouge et du piment. Et elle a crié, hurlé. Et ses yeux ont tourné, débordé et plongé dans le vert de la forêt puis le jaune de l'harmattan et enfin le rouge, le rouge du sang, le rouge des sacrifices" (Kourouma 33). This powerful statement describing her screams and contrasting the red colors of the iron and blood with the green of the forest evokes strong feelings in the reader towards the cutting that Salimata has had to endure. The sense of connection to Salimata's pain that Kourouma seems to possess moves him into a new category of writing and insightfully introduces many of his audience to the horrors of the practice. His narrative does not cloak the practice of FGC behind closed walls as did wa Thiong'o in The River Between.

Kourouma continues to describe Salimata's experience with FGC in the form of a flashback of the event. Her memories of the day of her excision are not all focused around the pain of the cutting and the reader gets a glimpse of the importance of the ceremony surrounding being cut. Salimata's mother explains it :

«Tu verras,» disait-elle souvent alors que Salimata était une très petite fille; «tu verras, tu seras un jour excisée. Ce n'est pas seulement la fête, les danses, les chants et les ripailles, c'est aussi une grande chose, un grand événement ayant une grande signification . . . L'excision est la rupture, elle met fin aux années d'équivoque, d'impureté de jeune fille, et après elle vient la vie de femme.» (Kourouma 34)

With Kourouma's description of this rite of passage, there is a brief attempt to show some reasoning behind the genital cutting of small girls; however, the persistence of Salimata's suffering overshadows any sort of validity that may have been achieved.

Salimata's excision ceremony does not end in pride as she was told it would, in fact, just the opposite. Having fainted because of the pain, the *féticheur*, Tiécoura, carries Salimata back to his hut where he proceeds to rape her. It is Salimata's perception of this incident that again gives Kourouma's writing a sense of authenticity where the reader actually feels the pain of this young girl:

C'était là, au moment où le soleil commençait à alourdir les paupières, que la natte s'écarta, quelque chose piétina ses hanches, quelque chose heurta la plaie et elle entendit et connut la douleur s'enfoncer et la brûler et ses yeux se voilèrent de couleurs qui voltigèrent et tournèrent en vert, en jaune et en rouge, et elle poussa un cri de douleur et elle perdit connaissance dans le rouge de sang. (Kourouma 38)

Kourouma again uses colors and vivid language to describe her experience. Salimata's rape is then blamed on *le génie*, as was her subsequent infertility. This realistic and detailed narrative reveals a new, more personal side of FGC.

While the reader knows the male author was never in Salimata's, or any other woman's, exact situation, Kourouma somehow transports him or her to be witness to Salimata's torturous experiences. He exposes the pain of young women in this Malinké culture who undergo FGC but also the importance behind this practice. However, the awareness that the reader has gained is still missing an element; the actual voice of a female who has personally experienced FGC still needs to be heard.

Women's Voices are Heard

Women around the world continued to struggle against male dominance that still existed in the 1970s and desired to be heard. Some West African women discovered someone who could give their voices a platform; that someone was the Sénégalaise feminist writer and activist, Awa Thiam. In 1978, Thiam's one-on-one and group interviews with both males and females, along with her own discussions on FGC and other harmful practices against women, were published in the book appropriately entitled, La Parole aux négresses. While the main focus is FGC, Thiam gives equal treatment to polygamy, sexual initiation, and skin bleaching, all threats to the wellness of women from the countries of Mali, Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Ghana, and Nigeria. From these interviews, awareness of violence against women in the form of FGC and the aforementioned traditions is heightened. What better way to learn about a practice than from the mouths of the women who have suffered through it?

Before examining the content of the interviews, it is important first to establish the context in which these interviews were conducted. In the preface to La Parole aux négresses, Benoîte Groult describes this context best: "Les témoignages que vous allez lire ne constituent pas un manifeste, n'expriment pas une révolte, ni même une revendication. Ce sont des confidences toutes simples qu'Awa Thiam a su recueillir dans leur naïveté..." (Thiam ii). As seen through the 1960s and before, writers had already presented anthropological studies of FGC in various African cultures. Awa Thiam attempts to do something very different: without expressing her own opinions, she gives a larger audience, in a very public medium, the ability to hear these women who were

brave enough to speak out about their own personal experiences. Although it is an emotional presentation, Thiam leaves the judgments and perceptions for the reader to form on his or her own.

From Thiam's opening interviews on polygamy, one learns about the male dominated environment that was oppressing these women in the 1970s. In one particular discussion, where both men and women were present, one Guinean man states: "...j'ai observé que les femmes guinéennes ne travaillent pas beaucoup. Elles sont devenues très paresseuses. Elles se sont 'émancipées.' L'émancipation pour beaucoup d'entre elles, cela veut dire paresser . . ." (Thiam 54). This is how these Guinean men perceive women who seek equality, as lazy and unmotivated. With these interviews, the reader becomes aware of the negative male perception of women who are willing to speak out and seek independence. While unfortunate, it is not a surprise that the majority of women present at this particular discussion on polygamy never once spoke (Thiam 43). Their silence in this mixed gender discussion reiterates the impressive nature of Thiam's efforts to encourage these women to open up in other more inviting contexts.

In one such individual narrative, a young woman from Mali describes her own genital cutting that took place when she was twelve years old. While not an uncommon age, she was a bit older than most when she was cut. Subsequently, her memories are very vivid and are a good representation of the dozens of other women's accounts that Thiam recorded.

From the beginning of this young woman's account, the role that women play in cutting the girls of their own community and family is shown to be significant. In this

case it is *la vieille*, the older, mature woman who plays an active role. She talks about her aunts leading her to the hut of the *exciseuse*⁷ and how she really had no idea what was about to happen to her: “Je ne savais guère ce qu’était l’excision... Mes aînées me disaient que l’excision n’était pas une opération rude. Ce n’est pas pénible m’ont-elles répété plusieurs fois... Ne cherchaient-elles pas tout bonnement à me rassurer et à dissiper mes angoisses ?” (Thiam 82) It is obvious that this young woman wants to trust the women in her life, even though in her heart, she knows it is something awful.

Unfortunately, “awful” does not effectively describe the account of her cutting that follows. Her description begins with her being held down by several other women, one holding her head, others holding her arms, and yet others holding her legs down and apart. She describes the feeling of having sand spread across her genitals and then a hand taking hold of a part of her genitals. She then says, “J’aurais souhaité, à cet instant, être à mille lieues de là, quand dans mes pensées de fuite, une douleur lancinante me ramena à la réalité” (Thiam 82). The reality is that she is having much of her genitalia completely removed, piece-by-piece, without any anesthesia. First her inner labia are cut off, then her clitoris. After describing the large amount of bleeding that ensued, she herself says something that later would become a very controversial word choice. “Après, les femmes lâchèrent prise, libérant ainsi mon corps mutilé” (Thiam 83). *Mon corps mutilé*-- three simple words with big import for one twelve-year-old girl and millions of others like her.

⁷ In the case of Mali the exciseuse, or the person who performs the procedure of female genital cutting, is usually an older woman from the cast of gatherers (Thiam 81).

Maybe just as painful as the procedure are the events that followed. Immediately after the procedure, the young girl is forced not only to walk, but also to dance. Barely able to move, she attempts to dance, but describes this effort: “Toute aux larmes je sautillais plutôt que je ne dansais” (Thiam 83). After passing out during the “festivities,” the girl is ridiculed for not having been brave.

In other narratives, women recount their infibulation; that is the removal of their clitoris and inner labia, the sewing together of their outer labia and the small hole that is left to heal around an inserted piece of straw to allow for the passing of urine and menstrual blood. These women have yet another painful experience waiting for them on their wedding night when their wounds are either forced open by their husband’s penis, or they are cut open by the husband or the *exciseuse* (Thiam 85).

From these accounts the reader learns about the specific details of several types of FGC. As seen in prior examples, the situation of women submitting other women to this practice is also evidenced. In a 1993 interview with Thiam, Alice Walker specifically asks her about this phenomenon of women subjecting other females to a practice known to be harmful: “I think there are no worse enemies for women who are struggling for their rights than women who totally agree with the patriarchal ideology, who willingly take the men’s side against women who want to have their rights respected and strengthened” (Walker, Parmar 288).

As one continues to read the different accounts in Parole, one learns more and more about women who have tried to rebel against the practice of FGC. Some of these women succeed, while far too many fail. One woman tells her story of trying to avoid

having her own daughters cut. Against her will, the grandmother of the girls essentially kidnaps them and forces them to be excised and infibulated. Story after story, strong women reveal their internal and external battles with FGC; while sometimes their roadblock is male, more often than not, it is female.

Thiam also delves into an analysis of the origins of FGC. As described in my own introduction, Thiam is unable to pinpoint the exact origins of FGC and has found that while many Muslims believe in genital cutting, there is no foundation in Islam to substantiate the practice. Those who continually cite Islam as their reasons for cutting, the Bambara of Mali for example, also cite sexual control of the male over the female. Thiam also mentions many of the “myths”⁸ behind some cultural practices of FGC. The Dogons of Mali, for example believe that the clitoris is the part of woman’s genitalia that is male and thus needs to be removed to render her truly female (Thiam 91). A recurring legend in many different cultures is that of the “vagina denta,” where the clitoris is thought to be sharp like a tooth or knife and therefore could potentially inflict pain on a male or even a baby during childbirth. Although seemingly ridiculous, it was continuing to come up in discussions about FGC into the 1970s.

The pain of the cutting and recovery, the pressure of women against women, and the reasoning behind FGC are all revealed in La Parole aux négresses. Thiam helped bridge the gap between those Africans who practiced FGC and those westerners who knew nothing about it. This bridge was constructed on the building blocks that had been set by the anthropological texts of the 1940s and 1950s, then by the male narratives of the

⁸ I hesitate to use the word “myth,” as the belief systems of various cultures should not be so undermined; however, this is the term that Thiam, herself, uses in Parole.

1960s and early 1970s. This bridge that Thiam built both helped lift the taboo of those who had endured themselves or had witnessed FGC and created an awareness in the western world about FGC.

The First Steps of Activism Against FGC

Whether from reading La Parole aux négresses or any other informative source about FGC, readers of fiction and non-fiction alike became increasingly aware of the harmful female genital cutting that was happening to millions of girls and women in Africa. Horrified by the details and the seemingly “primitive” nature of the practice, westerners and Africans alike wanted to do something.

In addition to the increased amount of writing, through various modes of communication such as radios, television and computers, people were becoming increasingly aware of the world in the 1970s. However, this idea of globalization was a new concept, and the discovery of “others” and “others’ cultures” was still awkward, although well intentioned. Globalization is a movement that is vital in moving towards the activism against harmful practices around the globe, including FGC. One important factor contributing to this globalization is the literature written about cultures by authors from those cultures. In an interview with fellow African writer, Jean Ouédraogo, in 1997, Ahmadou Kourouma states it perfectly:

Nous (les écrivains africains) apporterons à la francophonie des techniques de conter et nous apporterons à la mondialisation la cosmogonie de nos peuples, la

structure de nos langues qu'au fond nous avons créée et qui est la quintessence de notre génie. Et [elles] doivent entrer dans la mondialisation, pour que cette mondialisation soit le fruit de toutes les connaissances du monde constitué par les différences de tous les peuples. (779)

Novels such as Kourouma's Soleils des indépendances helped to create this new globalization. With it came global action through various world conferences on human rights and wellness such as the United Nation's declaration that 1975 was the "Year of the Woman."⁹ Unfortunately, Africans saw themselves as being examined under a microscope with their traditions being judged and condemned by the imperialistic former colonizers. African literature of the 1970s, such as Thiam and Kourouma's works, created awareness of FGC and helped to slowly lift the taboos of talking about it. African women's voices were beginning to be heard, yet effective activism towards the eradication of the practice was still a few literary steps away.

⁹ Also in 1979 the World Health Organization (WHO) held a conference in Khartoum on the "Traditional Practices Affecting the Health of Women."

4. The Movement From Awareness to Activism of the 1980s

The fictional and non-fictional francophone African writers of the 1970s, such as Kourouma and Thiam, were presented with a cultural gap between the west and non-west as they broached the topic of FGC. These authors' francophone literary works helped to close this gap by increasing awareness and weakening the taboo on FGC. As the new decade of the 1980s was beginning, however, more work was still needed to close this gap even further.

With most African countries transitioning out of their post-colonial status, there was a new sense of independence. After having looked inward and reaffirmed their traditions and social structures in the preceding decades, some Africans began looking outward toward the west. Once responsible for African oppression, the developed western countries of the 1980s now represented an opportunity for higher education, work, or simply an attempt to escape the harmful practices found in their own community. For some Africans, access to the west was simply impossible, just as for some, access to education, proper medical treatment, and even basic human rights were impossible. Because of these conditions, Africans began emigrating to the west, hoping to find a better life.

With continuing high rates of prevalence in 28 different African and Arab countries, FGC posed a major threat to millions of girls and women in the 1980s. Because of the new western awareness of this threat, both westerners and Africans began

to write about and discuss FGC. With this new decade came many key works of literature from a diverse array of writers from varying ethnicities: Des couteaux contre des femmes (1983), by French philosopher, Séverine Auffret; Prisoners of Ritual: An Odyssey into Female Genital Circumcision in Africa (1989), by American teacher turned ethnologist, Hanny Lightfoot-Klein; Khul-Khaal: Five Egyptian Women Tell Their Stories (1982), by Egyptian born and American educated, journalist Nayra Atiya; The Hidden Face of Eve (1980), by Egyptian born and educated doctor, professor and politician, Nawal El Saadawi; and the novel, L'Excisée (1982), by Lebanese born and educated and later American educated author, singer and professor, Evelyne Accad.

With their new awareness of the existence of the practice of FGC, many westerners wanted to know what the effects of FGC are on these young girls, more about the reasons behind it, why it still continued, and most importantly how it could be eradicated. Through the first-person narratives, reminiscent of those in Thiam's Parole aux négresses, philosophical discussions, and fiction, the aforementioned female authors continued to attempt to answer these western inquiries. The manner in which these works emerged and the reasons for which they were written are also vital points of the discussion of this literature that addressed FGC in the 1980s.

Western Literary Reaction to the Non-Western Practice of FGC

Qu'un quotidien du soir me tombe des mains ... Qu'est-ce en moi qui en rend la lecture impossible ? Tenter de répondre me force à reprendre la lecture interrompue. Résistance. Douleur, révolte alternées, entretressées.

Contraction du larynx : ébauche du cri. Les systèmes d'analyse et de compréhension auxquels j'ai l'habitude de recourir me laissent soudainement sans lumière face à : un quelque chose jamais énoncé, jamais pensé. Impensable. Que je m'efforce, pourtant, de penser.

(Auffret 7)

French feminist philosopher, Séverine Auffret, in her 1983 essay, Des couteaux contre des femmes, vividly represents the general western reaction to the “découverte” of the practice of FGC. As she explains above, she first read about the horrors of FGC in the newspaper. An article in *Le Monde* from February 1979 described in great detail the “excision” and “infibulation” of a young girl. Many met with the same experience, by reading a novel or magazine or newspaper article, and came to the realization that there are cultures in Africa that believe that cutting off parts of a young girl's genitalia with unsterilized equipment and using thorns to stitch her closed are somehow beneficial and/or necessary. From Auffret's shock and horror came an overwhelming need to research the practice of FGC by drawing from the already existing corpus of literature; Thiam's Parole aux négresses is, in fact, cited several times. Already a philosopher, Auffret then takes this information and launches into a philosophical analysis of FGC, thus completing her work of Des couteaux contre des femmes.

Auffret's discussion of FGC revolves around psychoanalysis of the importance of the practice in Africa. She also examines western reactions to FGC and whether or not westerners should attempt to be involved in the judgment of this non-western tradition. Auffret traces the history of FGC back to ancient Egypt and describes the flaw in

referring to those who practice FGC as “barbares” or “sauvages” (53). She reminds the reader that it was these same civilizations that led the world in art, literature, and science for thousands of years. She continues:

C'est dans cette partie du Proche-Orient organiquement liée à l'Afrique orientale qui, après avoir connu une efflorescence économique et culturelle sans précédent, est retournée à un état de sous-développement dépassant péniblement les conditions du néolithique. Quelles que soient les raisons historiques et politiques du phénomène, il est de fait que le Yémen, l'Arabie, la Somalie, l'Ethiopie, le Soudan, certaines parties de l'Egypte, sont demeurés pour des dizaines de siècles en retrait par rapport au mouvement historique mondial. (Auffret 141-42)

Auffret also discusses the debate that arises from those who are not willing to criticize the practice of FGC as a custom. She scolds those who believe that one should not reject a custom just because it is different from his/her own. She rejects this thought by suggesting that FGC should not even be considered a custom:

Coutume, vraiment? Coutume « différente » ? Lorsqu'une coutume traverse les ethnies, les classes sociales, les formations économiques, les religions, les continents... ce n'est plus une coutume, c'est une *politique*. Admettons qu'une coutume ne juge pas, du moins de l'extérieur. Une politique inversement se juge et se combat. De l'« extérieur » comme de l'« intérieur. » La politique est affaire d'intervention, de lutte et de solidarité. (14)

Like Auffret, Hanny Lightfoot-Klein made the unexpected discovery of FGC in the 1970s. An English teacher on a one-year sabbatical, Lightfoot-Klein, landed in Khartoum, Sudan, after a series of unconnected decisions and circumstances. The year was 1979, the same year as the WHO conference on “Traditional Practices Affecting the Health of Women.” However, it was not at this conference that Lightfoot-Klein learned of FGC but at a youth hostel in Khartoum, a young American man first informed her of the practice. She recounts:

...he quickly enlightened me. “You know what they do to women here, don’t you?” he asked. I pleaded ignorance. “They completely cut off all the external sex organs when they are little girls, and then sew them shut. They leave only a tiny, tiny opening.” “But surely they do this only among very primitive tribes in the bush,” I exclaimed. “Not at all,” he said. “It is done to every one of them here, at all levels of society, from the very top on down.”(Lightfoot-Klein 2)

Lightfoot-Klein’s reaction, like Auffret’s, my own, and many others was one of shock and horror. A feeling of disbelief ensued and many concerned readers wanted to do something about FGC to help all those young women and girls. While Auffret focused on research and philosophy, Lightfoot-Klein was actually present at a young Sudanese girl’s cutting ceremony within a month of the first time hearing about FGC. Her research took the form of on-site interviews with women involved personally with FGC in both Sudan and in Kenya. She witnessed the extreme taboo put on Kenyan FGC particularly since there had been recent Kenyan legislation forbidding the sexual mutilation of

women. While there is also Sudanese legislation in place against FGC, it has been in place for decades and is not enforced. As I shall later discuss, such legislation had not stopped the practice; it has only made discussion of the practice more taboo.

Lightfoot-Klein conducted hundreds of interviews, mostly in hospital settings, and from these, the western reader continues to learn more about the practice of FGC. Westerners like Auffret and Lightfoot-Klein were beginning to answer western questions: what are the physical and psychological effects on these women who are cut; why do some cultures continue to cut their young girls in light of these effects; and even, how can this practice be stopped?

The Egyptian Reaction from the Outside in and the Inside Out

Both Egyptian-born, Nawal El Sadaawi and Nayra Atiya, took advantage of the new western awareness of FGC and other women's issues such as polygamy, sexual violence, initiation and inequality, and lack of access to education.¹⁰ The literary response of these two women was quite different from that of westerners, Auffret and Lightfoot-Klein. While the latter two women took their own inexperience and lack of understanding of FGC as their motivation to explore more deeply into the practice, El Sadaawi and Atiya, used their own experiences to do so. However, even these two Egyptians were writing from two different perspectives. El Sadaawi grew up and was educated in Egypt and thus experienced Egyptian culture first-hand. Although Atiya was Egyptian-born and fluent in Egyptian Arabic, she had been educated in the United States

¹⁰ While neither women nor their works are francophone, there was a 97% prevalence of FGM in Egypt even in 1995. Therefore the Egyptian perspective is vital to providing a well-rounded treatment of the literature of the 1980s.

since childhood and did not return to Egypt until just before beginning her work on her 1982 compilation, Khul Khaal.

For many reasons, El Sadaawi's The Hidden Face of Eve is a pivotal work of non-fiction about FGC. This "sociological treatise" marks two "firsts": El Sadaawi was the first Arab woman to denounce FGC as a dangerous practice meant only to control a woman's sexuality and also the first woman writer ever to give a first-hand account of her own cutting. Written first in Arabic, The Hidden Face of Eve, was another essay in a series of essays written by El Sadaawi which put her under the scrutiny of Egyptian authorities. As the first Arab woman to be so outspoken against FGC, she endured many threats on her life (Zabus 97). She eventually had to flee from Egypt to exile in the United States to escape the violent criticism of her feminist ideologies. El Sadaawi is representative of women who on their own volition, not because of the prodding of western feminists, have taken on the fight for women's rights in their own culture. In fact, she speaks out against western attempts to crusade against single issues, such as FGC:

I am against female circumcision and other similar retrograde and cruel practices....But I disagree with those women in America and Europe who concentrate on issues such as female circumcision and depict them as proof of the unusual and barbaric oppression to which women are exposed only in African or Arab countries. I oppose all attempts to deal with such problems in isolation, or to sever their links with the general economic and social pressures to which women everywhere are exposed, and with the

oppression which is the daily bread fed to the female sex in developed and developing countries, in both of which a patriarchal class system still prevails. (El Sadaawi xxxiv)

El Sadaawi's comments in her preface to The Hidden Face of Eve, remind the western readers not to take FGC out of context and not to exclude themselves as being subjected to oppression of all sorts. With these principals as her basis for writing, she then shares with the reader--in English translation--the many issues that were confronting Arab women in the 1970s. This treatise provides a new and very important perspective not only on FGC, but also on other women's issues.

Like Awa Thiam, Nayra Atiya uses the voice of others to present a picture, five pictures in fact, of life for Egyptians in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Atiya, who was somewhat disconnected from Egyptian culture because of her extended exile in the United States, spent much time with different men and women during her return to Egypt. From their vast array of stories, she picked five first-person narratives of women, mostly Muslim, ranging from young to old. With these narratives, she reveals similar issues that El Sadaawi discusses. Atiya makes very little commentary on what she considers to be negative practices; she leaves that up to each narrator who recounts her own experiences.

El Sadaawi presents her essay on Arab women's different forms of oppression as an insider, having experienced much of what she discusses. In this way, she is an insider looking out to her own country and to the world. Atiya, while a native Egyptian, did not experience much of what her subjects experienced and therefore lets the reader, just as she did herself, observe these women's lives as an outsider looking in.

The Culmination of Themes in L'Excisée

Born in Beirut, Lebanon, Evelyne Accad experienced violence against her own people during times of war. Known for her focus on women's issues in the Middle East and in Africa, Accad joins the above list of women writers of the 1980s who chose FGC as a central theme in their literary works. The difference in Accad's corpus is that she produces a work of fiction that embodies many, if not all, of the struggles that these other women address in their essays and collections of narratives. By weaving many of the aspects of FGC into her 1982 novel, L'Excisée, Accad succeeds in answering many "how, why, and who" questions about FGC, the very same questions asked by the reader whose awareness of FGC had been raised by the francophone literary works of the 1970s.

L'Excisée presents the story of a young Lebanese woman. This young woman, E., is raised in a war-ravaged Lebanon. She feels unsafe at school and on the streets and unfortunately does not find refuge even in her own home. Brought up by a strict Christian mother and father, she feels both trapped by the war and by her family. Oppressed by her father, oppressed by war, E. needs an escape when P., a young Muslim Palestinian begins showering her with attention and promises of a peaceful life with him back in his own village where he was raised.

After literally being trapped in her room by her disapproving father, E., experiences a symbolic death and then rebirth: "Oui, elle sent qu'elle est morte à quelque chose et qu'en elle est en train de naître autre chose... c'est l'amour qu'elle sent naître en elle, l'amour qui permet de toujours renaître et de recommencer malgré tout" (Accad

76-7). This love that she believes is her rebirth drives her to leave home to start a new life with P., whom she sees as her savior from her oppressed existence. Unfortunately, P. and the new village that he leads her to, become next in line as her oppressors.

Beginning with the boat voyage to P.'s home village with her new friendship with a fellow passenger, whom Accad names l'Egyptienne, E. begins her own process of the discovery of FGC. Herself physically uncut, but psychologically mutilated by her own experiences nonetheless, E. is utterly shocked and horrified to learn that women would knowingly subject other women to such a harmful act.

The question of how FGC is performed and what its physical and psychological effects are on girls and women, the question of why this harmful practice continues to take place in so many countries, and the question of who is responsible are all addressed in L'Excisée. While presented in the form of fiction, Accad's descriptive and colorful language leaves the reader with a very vivid picture of FGC and its many related issues. The works of Auffret, Lightfoot-Klein, El Sadaawi, and Atiya also answer these questions in their own way, but none quite so vividly as Accad. Using Accad's descriptions as the primary source and the other four texts as substantiation, I will now explore the various aspects of FGC that were revealed in the 1980s.

What Are the Effects of FGC on Young Women and Girls?

A sense of nervous curiosity emerges from the lingering sense of horror felt in knowing the basic facts of this practice. In L'Excisée, E.'s initial discovery comes from

l’Egyptienne, her new acquaintance that she made on the boat on the way to P.’s home village:

Sais-tu ce qu’on leur fait aux femmes là-bas, à l’âge de la puberté, ou même avant, ou encore avant leur mariage si par mégarde, elles avaient réussi à échapper à la surveillance des vieilles ? Connais-tu la souffrance dans la chair même, la brûlure, la déchirure, l’arrachement de cet organe délicat et sensible logé entre les deux jambes, l’excision.... (Accad 84)

Through l’Egyptienne, Accad informs the reader, if he/she is not already aware, about FGC. While the works of Thiong’o and Thiam in the 1970s described the procedure of cutting with great detail, Accad’s descriptive language brings something new and emotional to the reader. L’Egyptienne continues with her powerful description of FGC by mentioning the effects that this procedure has on its victims:

...le corps secoué de spasmes, et le sentiment de honte et de honte terrible, et les cris des femmes, et la douleur lancinante et qui n’en finit plus, quand tu sais ton corps ne sera plus jamais le même, quand tu sens qu’on t’a enlevé quelque chose qui te donnait la possibilité de vibrer, de palpiter, quand tu as peur de mourir de tout ce sang qui s’échappe de ton corps, quand tu sais qu’on a transgressé ton corps, qu’on t’a déjà violée, qu’on t’a enlevé une partie de la vie, et qu’à la place on t’a cousue, ficelée, fermée, pour que tu ne puisses plus jamais respirer, t’ouvrir la vie, à la tendresse, à la rosée des matins du désert. (Accad 85)

With Accad's description, the reader is lead through not only the physical pain, but also the emotional pain. While this description is far from medical, the reader is able to begin to understand the finality of the loss of sexual pleasure that is felt by an "excisée." After being forced to wear a veil and being quickly thrown into the same oppression that the women in P.'s village have experienced all their lives, E. finds herself witness to an excision ceremony. She again feels, along with the reader, the lasting effects of what just happened to the innocent girls laying on their excision mats, screaming:

[les] jeunes femmes à qui on vient de trancher le frémissement de la joie, l'échange du regard voulu, l'appel du partage désiré ... l'ivresse de l'extase à deux dans l'accomplissement de gestes différents qui s'harmonisent pour un chant commun... pour une égalité respectant les différences de l'autre. (Accad 124-25)

Through both descriptions the reader learns of the lack of ability to achieve orgasm, the memories of the pain that will always be present in these girls' minds, and the feeling of one's body being violated.

El Sadaawi begins her non-fictional treatise with her own painful memories of her sister's and her own "circumcisions." Her details are vivid and as with Accad, the fear and pain that are felt by these young girls profoundly impact the reader. She recounts the details: "I screamed with pain despite the tight hand held over my mouth, for the pain was not just a pain, it was like a searing flame through my whole body. After a few moments, I saw a red pool of blood around my hips" (El Sadaawi 14). Through El Sadaawi's still vivid memories of this violent act on her six-year-old body, one is left to

recall wa Thiong'o's description of a male circumcision in The River Between. Where the female narrative was missing before, now, 20 years later, we hear a similar description of genital cutting by a woman, and it seems to take on a more personal significance.

This description marks the end of El Sadaawi's personal narrative, however, and it is in a more analytical manner that she addresses the effects of FGC on women. She recounts her experience during her time as a rural physician: "Severe haemorrhage was therefore a common occurrence and sometimes led to the loss of life. The *dayas*¹¹ had not the slightest notion of asepsis, and inflammatory conditions as result of the operation were common. Above all, the lifelong psychological shock of this cruel procedure left its imprint on the personality of the child" (El Sadaawi 51). She continues on to mention sexual frigidity as yet another possible lasting effect.

Lightfoot-Klein describes in a much more clinical manner more lasting effects of FGC in Prisoners of Ritual:

From the women themselves one learns that the consequences of the operation are with them throughout their lives. Nearly all of them reported difficulty with urination until the infibulation was forced open at marriage. The average period of time required to urinate, as reported by women, is 10 to 15 minutes...Nearly all infibulated women reported agonizingly painful menstruations, in which the menstrual flow is all but totally blocked.... (Lightfoot Klein 57)

¹¹ the local midwife who most often performed "female circumcision" on Egyptian girls.

Through her interviews with Sudanese women, Lightfoot-Klein also discusses the psychological effects that ensue during the life of many women who have undergone FGC. She lists phobic behavior, emotional withdrawal, and depression as some of these repercussions (Lightfoot Klein 61). She also brings up the recurring trauma that a woman can feel on her marriage night when her infibulation is forced back open by her husband. Not only can this result in a psychological fear of sex, but also the woman has to relive the pain of her original infibulation.

In the essays of El Sadaawi and Lightfoot-Klein, the descriptions are certainly informative, but their lack of personal connection (unlike that in El Sadaawi's introduction) does not leave a lasting impact on most readers. It is through Accad's novel that the western reader is made to feel that he/she is beginning to understand the effects of FGC.

Why Do These Communities Continue to Cut Their Own Girls?

Who is responsible for the continuation of such a harmful practice? FGC is responsible for the deaths of far too many young girls everyday in many countries in Africa and in the Arab world. Who is to blame? The men of the patriarchal societies? The women, who have themselves, undergone the same practice and then subject their daughters to it? The excisers who make the practice seem almost banal? The answer is unfortunately all of these.

In L'Excisée the reader observes the patriarchal influence in the practice of FGC. Surprisingly to E., her husband, P., while willing to marry E., an un-cut woman, is

representative of the men of the community who support the practice of cutting their young girls. When responding to E.'s shock at what she saw during the excision. P. says, “ ‘C’est la tradition. Tu n’aurais pas dû venir ici si tu étais si douillette’”(Accad 140). Male violence against women is also presented in the following confrontation between E. and P. After questioning the traditions of his Arab community and showing herself as a strong woman, P. reacts violently: “Mais elle est allée trop loin. P. la regarde avec haine et rancune, sûr de sa force et de sa toute-puissance, sûr de son pouvoir et ses valeurs. Il brandit une chaise contre elle et avance avec rage dans sa direction” (Accad 142). Ironically, earlier in the novel, P. had commended E. for standing up to members of her church during a meeting. Accad shows how someone who may have been a supporter of female and male equality in a different setting is transformed upon re-entering such a patriarchal society. The strong need for masculine control in this society where men have power over the women is again shown in Accad’s lyrical writing:

Masse informe d’élastiques enchevêtrés
L’homme a brandi son poignard
il aiguise ses couteaux dans les lumières de la ville
il fait briller la lame des matins
Il marche sur les fleurs à peines entrouvertes des déserts muets
Il s’imagine qu’il a compris la femme du voile
parce qu’il l’a mise dans l’enceinte
parce qu’il a fermé les portes
parce qu’il a muré les jardins

Et lorsqu'une femme s'élève
il la frappe
et lorsqu'une femme parle
Il lui cloue la bouche
et lorsqu'une femme le regarde
Il s'enfuit
et la ville se referme pour lui (142)

These verses remind the reader not only of the men in P.'s community, but also of E.'s father. The connection between the two again brings into focus that while E. was not physically excised, she had experienced a psychological cutting by her father and now by P. Accad's portrayal of the controlling male reveals the tragedy that if a woman wants to change tradition, men will be there to prevent her.

Male dominance in relation to FGC is also present in that women consistently cite men in their reasoning behind wanting to continue the practice of FGC. Women in the cultures where FGC is practiced are afraid that men will not want to marry them or their daughters if they are not cut. Men also express at times a fear of the clitoris and/or the external genitalia. This was previously seen in Thiam's narratives of the 1970s among other examples.

Male dominance has been a significant theme in each work discussed thus far; however, the prevalence of FGC does not continue solely because of male dominance. It is from this strong patriarchal influence that reality emerges of women acting against other women and girls. Women want themselves and their daughters to be accepted and

desired by these strong male figures. When recounting the procedures of cutting that have been performed on young girls, when discussing the person who leads her daughter to be cut, when describing the witnesses at the ceremony, it is the mother, the grandmother, *la vieille* who seem to be ever present. The role of *la vieille* is present in most of the literary works of the 1980s.

Accad reinforces the idea of the power of *la vieille* several times in L'Excisée. The first and most stunning comes from l'Egyptienne on the boat: “Et que les femmes crient...heureuses de se venger de ce dont la vie les a privées, elles aussi, heureuses de voir que le sang continue, que la souffrance ne s'est pas arrêtée à leur propre corps et que le cercle infernal se perpétue, et tourne et tourne...”(Accad 85). A description as raw and honest as this is rare in the personal narratives found in the other texts of the 1980s. Although this vision of *la vieille* is certainly present, not many women would openly admit to being “happy” that more girl's blood was flowing, “happy” that the painful tradition is continuing.

In Des couteaux contre des femmes, Séverine Auffret also expresses strong feelings towards the unfortunate fact that it is women against women in the practice of FGC:

Je transcris des propos effectivement prononcés : « Mais cette horreur, ce sont les femmes qui la font aux femmes. » Ici l'exciseuse, la matrone, la sage-femme, la « vieille » ; la...la mère. Excision, infibulation : cruauté des femmes contre les femmes, haine de soi de la femme corroborant son caractère haïssable. Secret le mieux gardé par les femmes... (15)

Sometimes confronting the role of *la vieille* is the young woman, the woman who is young enough and strong enough to stand up against this practice. *L’Egyptienne* is one such woman who decides to act against the traditions of her community. Her version of activism is to flee. Exile is one way to express discontent for one’s own culture. When faced with a strong patriarchal and even violent matriarchal force, exile may be the only escape. However, one person’s exile results in nothing more than one person’s safety, and the rest of the community is left at risk. E. tragically commits suicide at the end of *L’Excisée*, which is, in a way, a permanent exile. Even though she saves one of the young girls of the village by bringing her along on her escape, she is leaving the problem behind to threaten other girls. While this idea of escape, in the young girl’s departure and E.’s suicide, is reasonable, the future of the young girls of these communities relies on someone to stand up to *la vieille* and to the dominant male and act.

These works of the 1980s have indeed addressed western inquiries. In particular, Accad takes the reader closer to FGC and allows an “outsider” to be a witness to the pain and complicity involved in this harmful practice. Moving from shock and horror, to curiosity, and on to knowledge, awareness is increasing. The informed reader again feels drawn to act against the practice. FGC-affected countries need activism to eradicate FGC, but by whom and how? Evelyne Accad expresses this sentiment well in *L’Excisée*:

Comment arrêter cette mutilation avant qu’elle n’en engendre d’autres ?

Prendre mes larmes pour laver le sang

Prendre mes mains pour arrêter le couteau

Prendre ma voix pour faire entendre un chant nouveau au-dessus des cris

Prendre l’oiseau et lui donner l’espace d’un ciel harmonisé et bleu
Prendre l’arbre et le planter dans le désert près de l’oiseau (125).

Activism in the 1980s

With an increased emphasis on globalization, the newly informed would-be activists first looked to international organizations, such as the United Nations and the World Health Organization. This drive towards activism became more relevant to westerners as they began to witness FGC first-hand as the rise in immigration of the 1980s brought the practice within the borders of their respective western countries.

The aforementioned works that address the issue of FGC were primarily distributed in the west and were often not accessible to those in the rural regions of Africa. In a limited way, however, non-western activism was beginning. Many times the leaders of this activism were the very authors of the texts, Awa Thiam and Nawal El Saadawi for example. Unlike in the west, the 1980s activists in various African countries received harsh, negative responses by fellow members of their communities.

This decade found both western and African activists searching for solutions. Although the west was trying to help better the lives of African women and girls faced with FGC, these same African women were very skeptical of western attempts to “help.” The 1979 WHO conference on “Traditional Practices Affecting the Health of Women” helped to spark dialogue about harmful practices in Africa, such as FGC. This top-down approach to activism, however, seemed simply to highlight the disconnect between government level decision-making and the rurally located African.

The years of 1976-1985 were declared the UN Decade for Women, and the last in the series of three world conferences was held in Nairobi in 1985. A document that emerged was entitled *Strategies for the Advancement of Women to the Year 2000*. These conferences certainly opened up the dialogue about violence against women including FGC. In 1984, the Inter-African Committee (IAC) met in Dakar to coordinate national and international efforts to eliminate what was then referred to as FGM. FGM became one of four “harmful traditional practices” along with childhood marriage, nutritional taboos and delivery practices (Shell-Duncan 12). The IAC seemed to be the bridge between the UN and Africa and began by using education to help disseminate their anti-FGM message.

Various NGOs were also formed in this decade, branching off from the IAC. GAMS, Groupe pour l’Abolition des Mutilations Sexuelles was formed and also focused on educating women about the health risks of FGC (Zabus 230). These organizations were trying to get their message out to the people most affected by FGC, but those same people were not necessarily ready to be an open audience. Taboos still existed on discussing FGC and women’s sexuality in general, and it seemed that the message of these NGOs was not being heard. In the 1980s there was little national support for what these groups were telling the African communities, as most African countries had no legislation against FGC. There seemed to be a need for a wider proliferation of literature similar to that, which had been previously published.

In the west, the texts and subsequent increased awareness were evidently making a difference. In 1982, for example, there was a widely publicized case of a young Malian

girl in France who had died from complications arising from FGC. In 1983, the French Supreme Court of Appeals declared that the “the amputation of the clitoris was a mutilation” under Clause 312-3 of the French Penal code (Zabus 210). The west was invoking legislation against the practice, while members of the immigrant population were continuing to cut their young girls. The need for education was obvious as the immigrant population was not aware of the legislation and/or the risks of FGC.

Through both examples of activism in the west and non-west, one can see that there needs to be a balance between legitimization through legislation and a higher level of local awareness of the harmful and unnecessary nature of FGC. The literature of the 1980s seemed to be very powerful in carrying this message to the western reader who (theoretically speaking) then pushed for the involvement of international organizations and for the enactment of their own legislation. Through increased accessibility, the literary works and media of the 1990s would continue to disseminate this information to the west and promote activism, but more importantly, to disseminate this information more deeply into the lives of the Africans who needed to be able both to accept this activism on the part of others and create their own.

5. The Literary Activism of the 1990s

With Accad's L'Excisée and other pivotal works from the 1980s, western awareness of the practice of FGC was continuing to be clarified. Women trying to survive in a patriarchal society, women subjecting other women and girls to FGC, and the harsh physical and psychological consequences of FGC, increased concern for the well being of young girls and women being subjected to the practice. With some international and national declarations and legislation in place against FGC in the 1980s, one would expect to see drastic declines in the number of girls and women who were being cut. Unfortunately, this is not necessarily the case.¹²

The lack of visible improvement in the treatment of young girls and women with respect to FGC continues to promote more and more people, both from African countries where FGC is practiced and from the west, to write about FGC. Throughout the 1990s we see francophone essays, studies, novels, and films, which address FGC through diverse methods and themes. Literary works of this decade, published primarily, but not exclusively, in the west, reflect the fact that there was already a base level of awareness

¹² Statistics of the prevalence of FGC in the 1990s were somewhat inconclusive, as there were inconsistencies in the method of gathering information. During the 1990s statistical analysis improved with more qualified interviewers and clearer, more extensive interviews. Unfortunately, the statistics collected prior to these improvements were the only source of comparison. These inaccurate results along with the phenomenon of interviewees reversing their FGM status meant for less than precise measurements of change (Felman-Jacobs 14).

of the practice in place. These works also show the dire need and, in some cases, the existence of activism towards the abandonment of FGC.

The image of African women standing up against their own community's practice of FGC is present in the experiential autobiography of the Togolese refugee, Fauziya Kassindja in Do They Hear You When You Cry and in Ivorian author Fatou Keïta's novel, Rebelle. Western activism is seen from American, Alice Walker in both her novel, Possessing the Secret of Joy, and in her film, Warrior Marks. Anne-Laure Folly's documentary film, Les Femmes aux Yeux Ouverts, like Walker's film, seeks to increase not only awareness of FGC, but also other harmful practices against African women. As a fitting end to this decade, the subject of FGC--its presence and legislation against it in France--is discussed in Martine Lefeuvre-Déotte's essay, L'Excision en procès: un différend culturel?, and in L'Immigration face aux lois de la République, a collection of essays under the direction of Edwige Rude-Antoine.

Through these pivotal texts and films, we begin to see the product of western perceptions and awareness of FGC and to hear the once silent voices of the victims of the practice. With ever increasing numbers of African immigrants, the need for activism against FGC in the west rises and the increasing sense of the global impact of FGC is felt by many and is reflected in the literature of the 1990s. In the previous decades, fictional and non-fictional texts had helped bridge the gap between outsider perceptions and insider taboos. To what extent the outsider should be involved in the abandonment of FGC is the question of the 1990s.

The Progress from Exile to Asylum

Throughout out the decades women have had very limited opportunities to escape from the practice of FGC. Many women may not have even desired to flee from their homes given the lack of exposure to anything else but their own, even if harmful, traditions. Those who would like to escape often possess the lack of financial means to remove themselves safely from their potentially harmful situations. Beginning in the 1980s, stories emerged of women being forced into exile because of speaking out in opposition to harmful practices against women that were being performed in their countries. Senegalese Awa Thiam and Egyptian Nawal El Sadaawi are among these activists who were forced into exile to escape the harsh scrutiny of their governments.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s we see an increase in women who are trying to escape their cultures out of fear for their own well being. Whether to escape FGC or other harmful traditions, such as forced and child marriages, these women begin to tell their stories in news reports and in fictional and non-fictional texts. Fauziya Kassindja is one such woman from Togo. In her autobiography, Do They Hear You When You Cry, Kassindja recounts her childhood in Togo, her education in Ghana, her escape to Germany and then to America where she eventually received asylum in a landmark court case.

Through her experiences, the reader is transported to Togo where Kassindja had a pleasant childhood with four sisters and two brothers, a kind mother and doting father. It is when Kassindja's father dies and her estranged aunt arrives that her life is transformed. She is shocked to find that her mother has been forced into exile from her own children

by her late husband's family. Essentially orphaned in her teenage years, Kassindja is forced into a marriage with a man much her elder and who already had three wives. It is during this arranged marriage ceremony that Kassindja was to be subjected to *kakia*, or excision. Ironically, it was because of *kakia* that her father was initially at odds with his family. In fact, Kassindja describes *kakia* as a practice "which both my parents abhorred and both my father's siblings believed in and had done to their own daughters"(76).

With her father gone, Kassindja was no longer protected from *kakia*. It was after this sickening realization that she resigned herself to the fact that she was to be cut. Fortunately for Kassindja, her older sister, Ayisha, helped arrange her escape from this impending harm. Given money from her mother, Kassindja first went to Germany where she resided illegally for several months. Upon the urging of a fellow African, she decided to go to the US where she hoped to easily receive asylum. Due to miscommunications and harsh treatment by the then INS, Kassindja did not initially obtain asylum and was instead put into a series of INS holding facilities, essentially jails, for nearly two years. During this period of harsh treatment and legal battles, she finally won asylum as a refugee trying to escape the harmful practices of forced marriage and FGC. This feat was made possible with the help of many westerners, especially Layli Bashir. Kassindja was able to escape FGC and she is able to share with the reader what this Togolese ritual of FGC involves:

As I've been told, four women hold the girls down with her legs spread, while the *nachane* scrapes off her woman parts—I'm not sure how much of them—with a razor or knife. Then she applies some herbs or something

to stop the bleeding, and binds the girl's legs together from hips to knees for forty days to give the wound time to heal. During that time the girl remains in bed and is not allowed to see anyone except her immediate family and the *nachane*, who comes every day to help her urinate and check how the wound is healing. (Kassindja 77)

Kassindja also discusses the number of girls who have died from tetanus as a result of having been cut in a non-sterile environment. She also gives examples of women dying from hemorrhaging. Kassindja explains the community's perception of these deaths: "They believe terrible things can happen if a girl isn't cut, but would never admit that girls do in fact die from having the procedure itself. It was her time to die, is all they would say" (Kassindja 77). She then continues with a more personal example of her community's beliefs: "When Ayisha's (her older sister) first baby died shortly after birth, people said the baby had died because Ayisha wasn't circumcised" (Kassindja 76).

In prison in the US, Kassindja met a woman who had been infibulated and who revealed her mutilated body. Through Kassindja's eyes, the reader is able to see the reality of FGC: "There was nothing there. Nothing. She had no genitals. Just smooth flesh with a long scar running vertically between her legs where her genitals should have been. And a hole. A gaping hole where the urine and blood would pass through" (Kassindja 456). The cut woman tells her that "this" is what awaits her if she decides to return home and then tells her of the many times she has had to be recut and resown before and after each child birth.

Some feminist critics would say that Kassindja is not considered a strong woman because of the fact that she fled Togo and never went back to attempt to invoke change or to spare others from the harmful practice. I, however, disagree since she was willing to sacrifice the life that she had known to protect her own safety and well being. In fact, her actions were not only powerful, but her escape and asylum helped to further increase western awareness of FGC.

The New York Times published a front-page article discussing the situation surrounding Kassindja's case. As a result of this article, Kassindja and her legal team "received literally hundreds of calls and letters of support for her" (Kassindja 519). Did Kassindja's actions save others from being cut? Maybe not directly, but we see positive results emerge from her efforts to seek asylum and from her autobiography. With the profits from the sale of Kassindja's autobiography, Bashir was able to start the Tarihih Justice Center for the promotion of human rights and the legal protection of immigrant women (Kassindja 526). Also, many other women were driven to write about their own experiences not only in autobiographies but in fiction as well. This was the case with the encouraging story of a young strong woman in Fatou Keïta's francophone novel Rebelle.

From Escape to Activism

Ivorian author, Fatou Keïta, uses her own experiences growing up in the Ivory Coast to write the powerful novel, Rebelle. Keïta artfully uses fiction to reflect the discussion of FGC in the 1990s. There are a number of elements that set this particular novel apart from other novels. Like Evelyne Accad, Keïta is writing from an insider

perspective, but unlike Accad, Keïta's novel was on the bestseller list in the Côte d'Ivoire and was published by an African publishing company. For one of the first times, an African woman is writing to a francophone African audience about what she sees as a harmful African tradition. She is hoping to instill African activism against the practice by specifically targeting an African audience.

This non-western instigated activism becomes increasingly important in the 1990s. FGC-affected women are beginning to react, as growing numbers of western activists become involved in a crusade to save women from their own traditions. Some of these non-western reactions are very defensive in nature. Many FGC-affected women feel that westerners simply do not and cannot grasp the deeply imbedded nature of the tradition of FGC. Therefore, it is quite significant that Keïta's message against FGC is presented by an African woman to other African women.

Keïta's protagonist is Malimouna who lives in what the reader assumes to be a village in Africa, possibly la Côte d'Ivoire, called Boritouni. FGC is commonly practiced in her village and the village exciser, Dimikèla, becomes the antagonist. While in the bush surrounding the village, Malimouna, catches Dimikèla in a sexual act with a man from the village. Keïta's simple description of what Malimouna sees and is feeling creates suspense for the reader and allows the reader to understand the significance: "Son cœur se mit à battre encore plus fort ...Elle ne pouvait avoir vu ce qu'elle avait vu. Tremblant de tous ses membres, elle se hissa de nouveau pour bien voir. Dimikèla était toute nue. Étendu à côté d'elle, le jeune Seynou . . ." (Keïta 9).

The shock at what she observes that day and the secret she keeps is worth the outcome. Already very wary of being cut, Malimouna, who is nearing her own “première épreuve de femme,” discusses her fears with her mother. Her mother subsequently sends her promptly to Dimikèla, whom she hopes will help quell the young girl’s fears. With Malimouna’s innocence, Keïta reveals to the reader some of the local belief systems behind the FGC in her community. Malimouna naively asks Dimikèla: “Si je ne le fais pas, est-ce que je me comporterai comme toi avec Seynou” (Keïta 21)? Fortunately for Malimouna, she is able to later answer this question for herself as Dimikèla agrees to “fake” her excision by simply cutting her thigh.

Her mother expresses her pride in Malimouna’s bravery during the ceremony, unaware that Malimouna knows that she will not be cut: “Malimouna n’avait pas l’air crispé de ses compagnes et sa mère était fière de la voir sourire. Ce jour si capital dans la vie d’une femme était enfin venue pour sa fille. Son cœur de mère se remplissait de l’orgueil”(Keïta 25). With this sentiment of pride, we revisit the role of *la vieille* of whom the western reader became aware during the 1980s. The fact that her mother knows the pain and complications that the cutting involves and feels no other emotion but pride speaks loudly for the woman-against-woman issue of FGC. This is reiterated when Malimouna’s mother is horrified, not relieved, when she discovers that her daughter is uncut. “Matou (sa mère) fit un bond en arrière et, se rappelant la présence des femmes dans la pièce voisine, étouffa un cri et se mit les deux mains sur la tête”(Keïta 35).

Another reiteration of one of the themes of the 1980s occurs when at the age of 14, Malimouna is forced into a marriage with an older man, Sando. On her wedding

night, Sando discovers she is uncut. After essentially having raped her, he decides to look at his young bride and comments: “Lui maintenant les jambes écartées, il s’était redressé pour admirer le spectacle de son jeune corps, et c’est alors que son regard s’était figé sur sa vulve. Les yeux exorbités, il avança la main ... Il avait bien vu. Il la lâcha alors, en poussant un cri horrifié” (Keïta 39). With the words, “exorbités” and “horrifié,” the reader observes the horror Sando feels, like Malimouna’s mother, in discovering that his young bride has not been cut. This other issue of man-against-woman underlies the entire first section of the novel in that Malimouna’s mother simply wants her to be a suitable bride, the only perceived way for a woman to be successful and happy—as a bride and then mother.

Malimouna then flees to the capital city of Salouma. There, she takes a job as a nanny, which subsequently leads her to Paris. Malimouna, who successfully, although painfully, avoids being cut, can be compared to Kassindja and the young girl that E. rescues in L’Excisée who also escape FGC. However, Malimouna’s experiences differ from this point onward. Instead of permanently fleeing from her country, she uses her experiences both at home and abroad to return and be an activist against FGC in her native region in Côte d’Ivoire.

Malimouna marries a French man and feels at ease with the fact that she is uncut. In fact she is already beginning to feel a sense of activism against FGC take hold. While living in Paris, Malimouna has a friend Fanta who wants to have her daughter cut while in France. Malimouna expresses her disapproval of her friend’s desires: “Mais elle savait que, dans cet instant critique, elle ne trouverait pas les arguments nécessaires pour

convaincre cette femme, pétrie de traditions. Comment la persuader, là, maintenant, tout de suite, que sa fille, sa petite Noura chérie, ne deviendrait pas une dévergondée simplement parce qu'elle garderait entier son clitoris" (Keïta 125)? Sadly, the child Noura dies of a hemorrhage and her friend, Fanta and her husband are arrested.¹³ Malimouna struggles with the arrest of her friend and wonders if imprisoning the parents who subject their children to FGC is truly the solution to the end of the practice in France.¹⁴ When discussing this with her husband, Philippe, Malimouna learns of his disapproval of FGC. He proceeds to call the act "barbare" (Keïta 127). Malimouna, who agrees that FGC is a harmful and seemingly unnecessary practice, does not support her husband's rhetoric. The following discussion ensues:

"Qu'est-ce que tu connais à la barbarie ?" hurla-t-elle, courroucée... "Il n'y a rien à comprendre au fait qu'une mutilation est une mutilation et que c'est un acte barbare !" Malimouna était furieuse de l'entendre, lui, parler de la sorte. Ne comprenait-il pas que ce n'était pas aussi simple ? Que pour ces gens-là, il ne s'agissait absolument pas d'être barbares ou cruels ?... Cela n'avait rien à voir avec la barbarie telle qu'elle était décrite par les journaux et la télévision, faisant apparaître les parents de Noura comme des monstres sanguinaires, des sauvages incapables d'aimer leurs enfants. (Keïta 127)

¹³ In 1983, Article 312-3 of the French Penal Code stated that removing the clitoris was considered and mutilation and was a punishable offense (Lefevre-Déotte 22).

¹⁴ This struggle is also presented in Martine Lefevre-Déotte's essay, *l'Excision en procès: Un différent culturel?*. She shows some of the flaws in the system with the lack of translators during court proceedings and the lack of awareness of the law against FGC among the immigrant population in France.

This discussion is quite significant. The fact that her friend was arrested shows the French legal stance on FGC in the 1990s. Also, Philippe's reaction reflects the French, and more broadly the western, perception of FGC among many people. FGC moved from being called female circumcision or excision to female genital mutilation in the 1990s. Those who used this term were primarily westerners and would admit that the label FGM was politically charged. During this period and into the 2000s, FGC-affected women objected to the term, "mutilation," because they did not want to be seen as mutilated women. Keïta effectively represents some of the western versus non-western struggles of the decade by putting this dialogue in her novel.

Malimouna's relationship with Philippe continues to deteriorate after the clashing of cultural beliefs that ensues after the death of Noura. After returning to Salouma, she leaves Philippe and marries a man from Salouma. With Karim, her new husband, she is subjected to domestic violence, both physically and emotionally. While she escapes FGC, Malimouna finds herself victim to another harmful traditional practice of polygamy when Karim takes a second wife.

Having had a friend whose daughter died from the complications of FGC in Paris and having endured physical domestic violence, Malimouna finds herself to be a pivotal female force in her community. She becomes president of "L'Association d'Aide à la Femme en Difficulté." Fighting for the education of all women in Salouma through l'AAFD, she hopes for the day when women are treated as equals and when the horrors of some of their traditions, such as FGC, are abolished. She, along with successes, experiences setbacks and expresses her disappointment:

Le plus dur pour Malimouna et ses amies, était de rencontrer de l'hostilité de la part d'autres femmes. Des femmes dont les propos pouvaient être encore plus virulents que ceux de leurs opposants masculins... Ces femmes étaient intraitables et semblaient nourrir de la haine pour ces «intellectuelles » qui ne connaissaient pas leur place dans la société car elles n'étaient pas de vraies Africaines fières de leurs origines. (Keïta 182)

Through Malimouna's attempt at activism, the reader gets an in-depth analysis of the struggles of women-against-women, men-against-women, and the effects of education in eradicating FGC. The reader also observes the delicate nature of western activism against an African tradition as seen in the imprisonment of her friend. Despite the setbacks presented in Rebelle, the simple fact that this novel was a best seller in la Côte d'Ivoire is an important milestone in presenting an anti-FGC message to FGC-affected women.

FGC in film in the 1990s

In addition to the groundbreaking presence of activism in francophone literature in the 1990s, FGC also found its way into film. FGC came to the "big screen" in many ways in the 1990s. With both the increased western awareness of the practice and the fact that FGC was not as taboo in areas where it was practiced, films could both be made and shown. With African women allowing themselves not only to be filmed, but also voluntarily speaking out against FGC, women's voices were being heard on film. Even in primetime American television, both Ted Koppel and Oprah Winfrey interviewed

African women who had experienced FGC firsthand. The first films to reach a western audience were both released in 1993 with Anne-Laure Folly's Les Femmes aux yeux ouverts and Alice Walker's Warrior Marks. Through personal, on screen interviews, both films attempt to increase even further awareness about FGC and push the viewer towards activism by putting a visual face of FGC in front of viewers. Alice Walker also published a widely read novel, Possessing the Secret of Joy, which she also addresses in her film. The reaction to this film was not all positive. Keïta actually refers to Warrior Marks in Rebelle and seems to represent the sentiment that FGC-affected women felt in response to seeing the film:

Malimouna se rappelait avoir vu à propos de l'excision, un film produit par une Noire américaine, écrivain de renommée mondiale. Dans ce documentaire l'auteur se demandait si les Africains aimaient leurs enfants pour les livrer ainsi aux mutilations génitales. Malimouna en avait été outrée. C'était là un raisonnement trop simpliste, une vision trop caricaturale (Keïta 128).

In 1995, Malian activist Coumba Touré presented a documentary film, Femmes assises sous le couteau, which briefly presents open dialogues from women speaking out about their negative experiences with FGC and why it is a harmful practice. The goal is to inform African women living in France of the laws that exist against FGC. The film, originally in French, was translated into Bambara, Soninke, and Toucouleur, to facilitate reaching out to the women from these cultures, living in France and who may not speak French (Zabus 239).

Activism of the 1990s

Touré's film, used to educate Africans was representative of one of the many forms of activism that were developed in the 1990s. Organizations like Tostan in Senegal were formed and began to focus on a more bottom-up approach to activism. Instead of pushing for legislation on an international level, Tostan and many other organizations focused on educating FGC-affected communities about the risks of cutting and also tried to disprove some of the traditional beliefs behind the practice. Many of these organizations functioned on western financial resources and were often run by westerners who enlisted local support. The hope was that the enabled communities would want to create legislation against FGC on their own initiative.

While these organizations were using a bottom-up approach to legislation, the top-down approach of the 1980s was beginning to move from international declarations to national legislation. According to the Center for Reproductive Rights Fact Sheet, the African countries of Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Djibouti, Egypt, Ghana, Senegal, Tanzania, and Togo all enacted legislation against FGC in the 1990s. The western nations of Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Norway, Sweden, and the United States did the same in reaction to the influx of the immigrant population of the 1990s.

Both the bottom-up approach to education at the local level and the top-down approach of the international to national legislation were addressing the practice of FGC; however, the number of cut women was very slowly declining, if at all. The way both of these approaches were being used needed to be evaluated and adjusted to bring about significant change.

6. Which Way to Go? The Movement towards Eradication in the 2000s

Because of the written texts and other media produced throughout the last four decades on FGC, many people have become aware of the practice. In increasing numbers, westerners and to a lesser extent, non-westerners have taken advantage of the easier access to literature, film, non-fiction, and information from various websites that has come in the 2000s. People in FGC-affected countries have felt more comfortable putting their own experiences into writing and even onto film because of the rising acceptability of discussing FGC and women's issues in general. This is an improvement over the 1980s and 1990s when authors were frequently scrutinized by their governments for speaking out against traditional practices. This increase in non-western vocalization against FGC is also in response to much of the attention FGC has received in the past decades. Wanting to make their opinions known both by their own people and by the west, more and more Africans are joining in their own fight against FGC. Whether documenting their own lives as autobiography or the lives of their fellow Africans through works of fiction or non-fiction, FGC is increasingly discussed through the voice of the "insider."

Francophone texts and other media of the 2000s also participate heavily in this dialogue about FGC. Through photography and the use of an adolescent boy's narrative in Benoît Lange and Dominique Voinçon's Cicatrice: un village et l'excision, the reader is exposed to FGC. Voinçon's perspective comes from Burkina Faso during a time when

some people have abandoned FGC, some are doubting the practice, while others continue to defend it. This perspective is also seen in Ousmane Sembène's highly acclaimed film, Mooladé, where the viewer is allowed to see the fictional journey that one village in Burkina Faso takes towards the abandonment of FGC. Each of these francophone works reflects a new attitude of FGC held by some in Burkina Faso, which can be representative of many African countries where this same debate is taking place.

Because of the increase in both western and non-western literature and activism against FGC in the late 1990s and into the 2000s, there have been a number of essays written which provide an analysis of these works. Transcultural Bodies: Female Genital Cutting in Global Context, edited by Yvla Hernlund, and Bettina Shell-Duncan's Female Circumcision: Multicultural Perspectives are two works that analyze much of the global perceptions of FGC that have arisen and activism that has taken place in the last decade.

Cicatrice: An “Outsider’s” Attempt at Presenting an “Insider’s” View

In the 1980s, Swiss photographer, Benoît Lange and Swiss journalist, Dominique Voinçon spent a couple of years in Burkina Faso in the region of Zaba. They attempted to integrate by learning the language, working and socializing as the culture dictated, and observing the traditional practices of the people of Zaba. With the photographs of Lange and the text of Voinçon they succeed in presenting a vivid portrayal of a few days in the life of the adolescent boy, Karamongo. Narrated in the third person, Voinçon follows Karamongo around and with interviews with the teenage boy *au terminal*, Karamongo talks about his own and his little sister's “initiations.” For him, his initiation, at the age

of eighteen, consists of a mask ceremony with an animal sacrifice and what is a celebration of their beliefs and camaraderie. For his little sister, Bagnina, initiation is something much more painful.

While Voinçon never says if the characters in this short story represent real people, the reader is certainly led to believe that this is indeed a work of non-fiction. The narrative actually begins with Bagnina, no older than seven, being lured into her family's hut with *beignets* and *bon-bons*. What awaits her is a shock to the reader and certainly to the young girl. The *somono* (exciseuse), along with her grandmother, mother, and a few aunts is waiting for her. Voinçon presents the actual excision from the perspective of Karamongo, who is sitting outside: "Le coeur de Karamongo se met à battre plus fort lorsqu'il entend les premiers pleurs de Bagnina. On la déshabille de force. Il devine le *sépéré*¹⁵ prêt à trancher... De longs hurlements lui glacent le sang" (Voinçon 10).

The reader discovers that Voinçon begins Karamongo's story with a flashback since in the next chapter it becomes obvious that Bagnina has not yet been cut. Through casual conversations among family members and friends, Voinçon uses Karamongo's interactions to give the reader an overview of the beliefs behind FGC. It becomes obvious that in the city where Karamongo attends a *lycée*, FGC is considered a harmful practice that should be prohibited. His friend Myriam contrasts the urban mindset with that of the more rural thinking:

"Vous [Karamongo and his friend] êtes vraiment naïfs de croire des choses pareilles! Mais c'est normal. Dans la brousse, on ne parle pas

¹⁵ The customary blade used to cut parts of the young girl's genitalia. The blade is later shown in a photograph.

comme à la ville. Moi, ma mère ne m'a pas fait 'couper.' C'était comme ça. Elle a toujours menacé ma grand-mère : 'Si tu coupes ma fille, je dirai à tous que tu es une "mangeuse d'âmes," et tu seras chassée de ton village.'"(Voinçon 26)

Here we see the ever-present *vieille* who still tries to exert her control over the young, but now the next generation is willing to stand up against her in ways young girls and women were not willing to do in past decades.

Unfortunately, Karamongo's mother, Badoro, despite her reservations, is unable to refuse the will of the grandmother. In an interesting mix of new and traditional beliefs, Badoro expresses her beliefs in a conversation with her mother about Bagnina's upcoming "initiation":

"Maman, tu as raison! Il faut être courageuse pour vivre cette épreuve. Sinon, serions-nous capables de traverser la vie et ses tourments ? Tu as raison de dire que nous risquons de préparer le chemin aux génies malfaisants. Mais il faut l'entendre aussi : j'ai connu des filles de mon quartier qui n'ont pas survécu à l'initiation. Je sais qu'elles sont mortes pour avoir trop saigné. Et si Bagnina mourait ?" (Voinçon 19)

The juxtaposition of the urban mother, who is able to keep her daughter from being cut by standing up against the grandmother, with the rural mother who is unable to refuse the grandmother's wishes is quite telling. These two situations show that the rural communities are just slightly behind those in the city towards the abandonment of FGC.

A voice is heard on a radio near Karamongo's compound saying that the government prohibits FGC.¹⁶ Voinçon allows the reader to be connected with the mindset of the rural family during this decade when many governments are officially prohibiting FGC. The author does this with the words of Karamongo's grandmother: " 'Le gouvernement! Bien sûr, il dit des choses, tout en haut. Mais nous, petites paysannes de la brousse, nous continuons nos coutumes. Nous avons toujours respecté les coutumes dans nos cours, et nous n'allons pas changer pour les paroles d'un ministre'"(Voinçon 18)! With Voinçon's realistic dialogue, that leaves the reader wondering if this is fiction or non-fiction, and Lange's vivid photography of life in *la brousse* of Burkina Faso the reader feels informed about the progress towards the abandonment of FGC in the 2000s.

FGC in the Full Length Feature Film, Moolaadé

Ousmane Sembène, while in his 80s, wrote a screenplay that received worldwide attention and acclaim. Shown at hundreds of film festivals, Moolaadé was viewed by both western and African audiences. Perhaps one of its most important showings was at the 2005 FESPACO film festival in Ouagadougou where it was intended to influence excisors (Zabus 260). The importance of this movie is found in the powerful story of a village, again in Burkina Faso, with its firmly entrenched beliefs and how the community as a whole was able to abandon the practice of cutting the young girls of their village. Presented in both French and a native language, the film reaches out to various audiences in meaningful ways.

¹⁶ FGC became a criminal offense in 1996 in Burkina Faso. It is unclear when this narrative is supposed to take place.

The opening scenes show a realistic looking village in the Sahel. This village, Djerisso, has a mix of traditional and modern elements. The lack of electricity and dirt floors are contrasted with plastic utensils, radios, and a water pump. This same contrast between traditional and modern is found within the people of the village as well. The village peddler or “mercenaire” disrupts the traditional scene with western products, such as batteries for the women’s radios. Similarly, the chief’s son returns from a long stay in France dressed in a crisp white linen suit, wipes his brow, and hands out money to the villagers. Both characters exude westernized persona. These men are gaudy in contrast to women in the courtyard who are grinding millet by hand and a group of elderly women who are somberly preparing for the “purification” ceremony.

This harsh contrast continues on in the debate of those who would cut the young girls of the village and those who would protect their daughters from FGC. Six girls escape the excision ceremony, four of whom seek refuge with a woman, Collé. The viewer discovers that Collé refused to have her daughter, Amasatou, cut a few years earlier because of her own negative experiences with FGC. Collé shows her scars from an obviously serious surgery, a form of caesarean, which had to be performed when she had severe complications while giving birth. These complications arose from her cut and possibly infibulated vaginal opening. Not knowing the reason for sparing her own daughter, these girls felt that Collé would save them as well.

Collé invokes the *moolaadé* which her community believes to be a protective spirit. With a simple rope tied across the opening of her compound, she keeps out anyone who may intend harm to the girls. The anthill in the middle of the village is believed to

be the remains of the last man who crossed the *moolaadé*. What is compelling is that Sembène masterfully shows how Collé can cling to a deeply entrenched tradition, the *moolaadé*, to seek the reasoning in abandoning another tradition, FGC, because of its harmful nature.

Throughout this standoff between the group of women elders who want to carry out the excision and the young girls with Collé, the viewer comes to understand the importance of FGC in this culture. The chief's son, Ibrahima, is returning to the village to marry Amasatou. However, upon learning that she is uncut, his father and he reconsider this choice. The viewer also learns of the negative effects of FGC with Collé's difficult birthing and later, by seeing her bleed after having sexual intercourse with her husband. One of the protected girl's sisters died while being cut. The girls who were cut are shown having problems urinating and are forced to jump up and down to open up their urethras. The painful evidence of FGC as a harmful practice is present throughout the film in very realistic situations. The most painful of these occurs when the viewer discovers that the other two girls who did not flee to Collé had committed suicide by throwing themselves into the well. Choosing death over excision is a very powerful image.

Sembène also clearly demonstrates the patriarchal pressure put on the women. The viewer sees several examples of polygamy, spousal abuse and threats of violence against the women. The men are genuinely worried and scared at the prospect of losing control over their women. If the women stop being cut, the men are afraid that they will lose their power over the women. They try to exert this control once more by removing

the radios from the women. It was on the radio that the message was heard that a Muslim leader had denounced excision. The irony is that the mosque in the center of the village is the nicest and obviously the most important building in the town, yet even their Muslim leader's words are doubted because of the fear of losing their patriarchal control.

Surprisingly, Collé gains support from her husband and one of her co-wives. This support is an important element of the film, since Collé had felt that she was alone in her beliefs; just one forward-thinking woman against the rest of the community, she actually is the catalyst for many others to join her in her protest against FGC. At one point, Collé is thinking of calling off the *moolaadé*. The women around her who were until that moment, silent, all join together in begging her not to do it. This is an obvious form of support from women who are not normally so vocal.

After much turmoil between the men and *exciseuses* against the other women of the village, a brutal beating of the women who have spoken out against the men ensues. It is the *mercenaire* who stops the beating and helps to convince the men of their error in trying to force the women to have their daughters cut. The village ultimately decides to abandon FGC. The men, while feeling the need for control over women, want more for their community to be intact. The image of the *exciseuse* and her partners as they drop their knives is a pivotal scene in the movie. Sembène closes with the scene of an ostrich egg that had been present in the middle of the village for years being replaced with the image of a television antenna. With this antenna, the filmmaker suggests that perhaps abandoning FGC is just one development of many that will come to this village. What initially seems dangerous to a culture may result in a positive outcome.

With Moolaadé, the viewer can closely witness what sort of sequence of events led a village to the decision to abandon the practice of FGC. In this particular situation, it was a combination of a strong woman holding firm to her beliefs in spite of male and some female scrutiny and the injection of outside opinion from a figure of religious authority heard in the radio message. With so many laws being enacted throughout the world on international and national levels and various NGOs being formed as support mechanisms to these laws, I believe the situation shown in Moolaadé will become more and more common.

A Critique on the Global Activism against FGC

“In the present work we are broadening this scope with the aim of adding to a growing literature that examines these practices (of FGC) in a global context” (Hernlund and Shell-Duncan 1). As simply as stated here, Yvla Hernlund and Bettina Shell-Duncan are two of many authors of the present decade to collect and compare the differing perspectives on FGC. Opinions discussed range from westerner’s lack of cultural understanding to whether or not the practice should simply be medicalized. These points and many others are also analyzed in Ragaia Mustafa Abusharaf’s compilation of essays, Female Circumcision: Multicultural Perspectives.

According to the Organization of Reproductive Rights, in this decade, Benin, Chad, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Guinea, Kenya, Niger, and South Africa have all enacted criminal legislation against the practice of FGC adding to the nine other countries that had enacted legislation in the 1990s. In addition to African legislation, some western

nations have also been added to the list of countries with legislation against FGC, including Belgium, Cyprus, Denmark, Spain, and the United States. Some nations legally pursue the person performing FGC, while others pursue the parents who request that the child be cut. This legislation is in conjunction with the large-scale action of the UN in its efforts to lessen gender-based violence. FGM being a main discussion point of gender-based violence, it has most recently been discussed in November of 2005 at the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against women. In her essay, "United Nations Measures to Stop Violence Against Women," Eva Sandis stresses the need for cooperation at the international and national levels and subsequently the essential participation of NGOs working to help support these policies: "With international political will and coordinated pursuit of such an agenda, hopefully the challenge of gender based-violence will be met" (Sandis 381). The coordinated pursuit that Sandis mentions is found in the hundreds of NGOs that exist around the world with goals of working towards the eradication of many kinds of violence against women. Many of these NGOs directly draw their statements of purpose from UN Declarations and Conferences. AMANITARE, for example, the African Partnership for the Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights of Women and Girls, is a pan-African network that has drawn their mandate directly from The Fifth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995.

While many NGOs are western based and funded with branches located in various African countries, the current decade has seen the increased development of African based NGOs. FeDDAF, Femmes, Droit et Développement en Afrique is one such NGO.

Based in Mali, it, like AMANITARE, describes itself as “un réseau panafricain rassemblant 500 organisations et 1200 individus en vue de promouvoir un ‘culture de l’exercice de du respect des droits des femmes en Afrique’” (“Assoc. Rencontres”).

Other organisations like RML/MGF, Réseau Malien de Lutte contre les Mutilations Génitales Féminines and AMSOPT, Association Malienne pour le Suivi et l’Orientation des Pratiques Traditionnelles join together with other NGOs like Tostan, founded in the 1990s in Senegal, to form networks, such as Réseau Stop MGF (“Assoc. Rencontres”).

Abusharaf and Hernlund and Shell-Duncan look at the variety of approaches that western and African countries have taken to eradicate the practice of FGC. Both fictional and non-fictional literary approaches and NGOs are discussed. In one essay in Hernlund and Shell-Duncan’s compilation, L. Amede Obiora discusses the success of the NGO, Tostan. In her essay, “Refuge from Tradition/Refuge of Tradition,” she cites Tostan as being, “a best practice example, especially insofar as they offer instructive insights into the political economy of circumcision and change strategies” (H and S-D 75). Tostan is repeatedly commended for its non-judgemental approach to educating communities where FGC and other harmful practices exist. There are thousands of examples in several countries where communities, in response to Tostan’s educational initiatives, have decided on their own to eradicate FGC in their community. Tostan is one NGO that has found the balance between enabling a community, through education, to make their own legislation against FGC.

Obiora makes a connection between the film, *Moolaadé*, and the progress that groups like Tostan have made: “It is noteworthy that an important lesson of *Moolaadé* is

that to respect the autonomy of individuals and the significance of their membership in local cultural worlds is to empower them to engage in critical deliberations of their positioning and commitments” (Hernlund and Shell-Duncan 71). She connects the essence of the francophone creative works of the 2000s with the ensuing activism of internationally supported, but African-directed, NGOs. It is this combination, evolving throughout the last five decades, that has led us to today’s situation of declining numbers of women and girls who are being subjected to FGC.

7. Conclusion

The literary and film works that have been produced in the last fifty years have built a bridge constructed from increased awareness, subjectivity, and openness in a discussion of Female Genital Cutting. This bridge has been the main thoroughfare for the origination, development and examination of activism towards the eradication of FGC not only in countries in Africa, but in the west as well. In examining selected anglophone and francophone fiction and non-fiction the audience of these works have gained much: A general awareness of FGC, both outsider and insider perspectives of the practice, an understanding of the complexity of the practice itself and its existence in various cultures and the type of activism that is needed to eradicate it.

I hope that my treatment of these texts and films has helped the reader to articulate and perhaps refine his or her own opinions on the many faces of FGC. As Chantal Zabus writes in her essay, Between Rites and Rights:

It is especially crucial to consider excision at this precise moment in time, at the very outset of the twenty-first century, as the body of experiential texts by women is growing and the “terrible tenacity” (Abusharaf 1998) of the practice is abating. Rites are indeed like proverbs: They are committed down to writing when they are on the verge of extinction. (265)

We can hope that FGC is indeed heading in the direction of extinction. What will always remain in the debate about the practice, however, is the undeniable truth that women around the world continue to be dominated by a patriarchy that causes them to struggle in order to achieve equality, or at the very least acceptance by both male and female peers. Many women feel pressured to alter their bodies in ways that vary from superficial to extreme modifications to help achieve this status. Underlying what might have been seen initially as a western versus non-western debate is the strong sentiment of male control that is not only associated with the practice of FGC, but is found all over the world in domestic, social, work-related and political arenas. Women need to not see each other as outsiders to one another's issues, but as insiders in the same struggle for female empowerment.

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