

Reflections on Female Genital Operations: Practicing and Theorizing Feminist Standpoint and Solidarity

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“Female genital mutilation has been inflicted on more than 125 million girls and young women. In the 29 countries where it is practiced, mostly in Africa, about three million young girls a year can expect the knife — or the razor or a glass shard — to cut their clitoris or remove it altogether” (Enslar, 12). This is interlude of the act *Not So Happy Fact* from the theater sensation, *the Vagina Monologues*. As part of the cast of its local production in 2014, I performed this piece which is an excerpt from UNICEF’s report on “female genital mutilation/cutting.” Unaware of the political implications of my words, I embraced the message that genital mutilation is a savage practice and a common plight of African women and girls. However, this seemingly universal position is far from a value-neutral assessment of the practice, but rather imbued with uneven and unequal forces of globalization, as many transnational feminist scholars have contested. In this essay, I will lay out and analyze the theoretical frameworks that allow feminists to challenge and reconstruct the popular discourses on female genital operations beyond its stigmatized image associated with exploitation and patriarchy.

Abhorring the gender-based violence in third world cultures, activists and feminists with restrictive liberal agendas in the Global North took it upon themselves to empower “third-world” victims of patriarchy through their network of international feminist advocacy. However, this form of global feminist organizing, assuming Western liberalism as the measurement and mentor of other cultures, not only overlooks the historical contingency and neocolonial economic violence accounting for the practice, but also ignores indigenous women’s agency by depicting them as universal victims (Naples, 2002:6). Similarly, Aili Tripp points out that the ethnocentric attitude inherent to global feminism often rests on monolithic discourses of patriarchy deriving from cultural stereotypes which are further used to justify the neocolonial approach taken by women in the Global North to “rescue” third-world women (2006:302). Stressing the neediness and backwardness of third-world cultures, Western liberalist feminists’ patronizing need to rescue third-world women not only Orientalize and infantilize women from the Global South, but also renders “non-Western” peoples incapable of cultural or political contestation and reduces “non-Western” society to a premodern state devoid of complex problems of late modernity (Bhabha 1999:82).

Indeed, many Euro-American authors and advocates often paint simplistic, sensationalized, and inaccurate portrayals of female genital operations, which imply a fundamental chasm between civilized “us” and unenlightened “them” and curiously reaffirm the superiority of Western liberal feminism (Walley, 2002:37, 19, 21). Take, for instance, Alice Walker and Pratibha Parmar’s influential film *Warrior Marks*. All interviews presented in the film are interspersed with snippets of a dancer’s almost erotic depiction of the horrors of circumcision (James, 2002:88). Fixating on the provocative bodily results of the practice, Walker and Parmar fail to recognize the complex entanglement, contradictions, and ambiguities underlying female genital operations heightened and accelerated by economic and political globalization. As one of their interviewees, Aminata Diop, explains, female genital operations feel to her a social necessity in a society that strictly separates gender roles. In this ethnocentric approach, female genital mutilation exists in a time warp, belonging to an ahistorical culture and tradition that contains no local tradition of resistance or contestation. Tracing patterns of argument on female genital operations, James and Robertson

summarize that Africa and African women are often reduced to “one uncivilized, traditional place out of history” (2002:5). Many white feminists from the Global North, represented by Alice Walker, theorize clitoridectomy and infibulation as the most salient issues affecting the status of women of color, and willfully ignore the social and cultural context of the practices (James and Robertson 2002:2). This singular, monolithic vision alerts Chandra Mohanty, warning that it might lead to “a divide between false, overstated images of victimized and empowered womanhood” (2003:248). Under the rubric of empowerment and emancipation, neoliberal regimes of human rights prioritize the white body as the norm against which other cultures and bodies are measured on their “progressiveness” and “modernizing advancement.” In response, Mohanty proposes that cross-cultural feminist work must be attentive to “the micropolitics of context, subjectivity, and struggle,” in addition to “the macropolitics of global economic and political systems and processes” (2003:223). Mohanty’s concerns are imperative in looking at scholarship and pedagogies on female genital operations, drawing attention to questions such as who defines human rights violation and whose agency is colonized in the concurrent discursive engagement.

Termed as the “hubris in transnational assistance” by Tripp, the western imperialist discourses and interventions on female genital operations not only fail to contribute to the reduction or elimination of the practice, but, in many cases, exacerbate the tensions between global and local activism and organizing. The question then arises: How do we resolve the conflicts of political power between the global and the local, the North and the South? Adjudicating the global/local, majority/minority, and center/periphery dichotomies is not new to feminist theorists. Feminist standpoint theorists, in particular, have argued that strong objectivity in knowledge production demands a focus on the lives of the marginalized whose collective and individual social positions enable them to see both from the center and the periphery. Sandra Harding particularly points out that starting off from the lives of marginalized people will unearth illuminating questions that are often neglected (2004:56). Mohanty also notes the significance of “look[ing] upward,” a strategy that centers research on voices from below and from the periphery (2003:231).

Seeing the problematics in the existing anthropological studies of female genital operations, Walley contrasts the dominant dehumanizing discourses with the social complexities of the practice drawn from her own observations, interviews, and experiences in western Kenya in 1988 (2002:20). Opposing the arrogant western approach which reduces the status of African women to their genitals (James and Roberson, 2002:5), Walley recognizes female genital operations as a means to socialize female sexuality and fertility. In the strictly sex-segregated society, women achieve social recognition by emphasizing their difference. Since genital operations are believed to accentuate the femininity of girls, this runs counter to common Western perceptions that view genital cuttings as only used to regulate or reduce female sexuality (2002:27, 29). This undeniable polar difference between local perceptions and global representations of female genital operations also represents a microcosm of the broader power dynamics in knowledge production. Researchers and activists from the Global North disproportionately use the “third world” as a mining field for knowledge extraction and often pay little attention to discourses in the field that challenge their preconceived notions.

However, it is also crucial to recognize that local knowledge is multifaceted, and not limited to one singular “authentic” perspective. In search of the “real” voices on female genital operations, Walley is perplexed by the complex and nuanced narratives from and interactions with the local girls whose social positions were not fixed (2002:25). For example, the same female student who had enthusiastically invited Walley to her sister’s initiation condemned the practice as a way of destroying women’s bodies (2002:24). Struggling to grapple with the contradicting narratives, Walley concludes that our conscious mind, as well as the unconscious, is a product of the time and place in which we are situated (2002:25). Indeed, local voices are not unified as other multicultural frameworks propose them to be. Naples is also concerned about the danger of homogenizing voices from the grassroots level, arguing that it may lead to the romanticization of struggles when reading power structures from below (2002:4). Thus, acknowledging the hierarchy and diversity within

local knowledge and local experiences further facilitates a critical understanding of female genital operations.

To bridge these tensions between the local and the global, Mohanty argues, feminist cross-cultural work needs a shift in its pedagogy. Feminist solidarity model, a methodology that focuses on building non-colonizing feminist solidarity or coalition across borders, is proposed as an alternative and adequate response (2003:242). Compared to the Eurocentric and cultural relativist model of scholarship, this pedagogy recognizes that the local and global simultaneously exist, and therefore suggests attentiveness to the interweaving of histories of diverse communities (2003:242). Similarly, attempting to reconstruct debates surrounding practices of female genital operations, James promotes scholars to conduct their research with cultural specificity (2002:97, 109). Other transnational feminist scholars continue to critique western scholarly hypocrisy that works to both singularize third-world women to be dominated by an ahistorical, patriarchal tradition and justify Euro-American institutions and values as enlightened exemplars of culture-free reason and rationality (Walley, 2002:34, 36). The intersex movement in North America, in particular, has debunked the double standard of the Euro-American approach to genital cutting and surgeries. While feminists and advocates from North America continue to stress legal response against practices “imported from other cultures” that harm women and girls, their attention is seldom directed to the fact that many medical professionals in the U.S. also engage in the surgical “correction” of infants born with intermediate or non-conforming genitals (Chase, 2002:127-8).

Despite voices of critique from transnational feminists demanding a reconfiguration of global representations of third-world women’s issues, specifically on female genital operations, plays and documentaries such as *the Vagina Monologues* and *the Warrior Marks* are still regarded as the progressive, liberal voice, and remain unchallenged in mass media and other social institutions. Globally and locally, feminists need to move on from neocolonial approaches that use gendered issues from the third world to uplift the Euro-American way as the “right way,” and start building non-exploitative coalitions and solidarities through mutual respect and understandings.

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