

ISRG Journal of Education, Humanities and Literature (ISRGJEHL)



ISRG PUBLISHERS

Abbreviated Key Title: ISRG J Edu Humanit Lit

ISSN: 2584-2544 (Online)

Journal homepage: <https://isrgpublishers.com/isrgjehl/>

Volume – II Issue -II (March – April) 2024

Frequency: Bimonthly



Culture as a Vessel for Women Oppression: A Critical Study of Female Genital Mutilation in Mabel Ekwierhoma's *The Cut Across*

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| Received: 08.01.2024 | Accepted: 11.01.2024 | Published: 12.01.2024

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Abstract

*This study explores how cultural norms and traditions can serve as vessels for the perpetuation of gender-based violence, specifically, against women. It explores cultural oppression against women within the context of Mabel Ekwierhoma's play, *The Cut Across*, focusing specifically on the practice of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM). Using feminist theory this study contends that female genital mutilation is one of the harmful cultural practices that hemline women. By examining the characters and themes within the play, this study sheds light on harmful cultural practices that contribute to the subjugation of women. This study goes beyond the play itself, engaging with the sociocultural dynamics that sustain FGM. Ultimately, this study seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of the complex interplay between culture and the perpetuation of gender-based violence, stimulating debates on how drama challenges systems of oppression. This study argues that women can surmount cultural oppression and achieve freedom by actively working together to champion equality, rather than being passive, waiting for liberation to be granted to them. This study recommends that drama can be used in amplifying the voices of the silenced by employing the transformative potentials of the theatre, which has can be used in addressing sensitive topics.*

Keywords: Female genital mutilation, Human rights, Infertility, Patriarchy and Excision

Introduction

Throughout Africa, there has been a consistent decline in the prevalence of ancient traditional practices, largely attributed to the influence of modernity. Harmful cultural practices such as the killing of twins and the Osu caste system, which sees certain individuals as less than human, serve as examples of traditions that have diminished. However, Female genital mutilation, one African traditional practice that has proven resilient against eradication, continues to pose a challenge to advocates of women's rights and gender scholars. Nutsukpo (2020) says that "A common form of

female circumcision practiced in Nigeria is clitoridectomy which is the partial or total removal of part of the clitoris" (p.30). Female circumcision simply refers to the excision of a portion of the external female genitalia, encompassing the clitoris, clitoral prepuce, labia majora (larger vaginal lips), and labia minora (smaller vaginal lips). This phenomenon is more than just a sociocultural problem; it poses a threat to a country's progress and involves a disregard for the rights of women. Female genital mutilation is frequently rooted in sociocultural norms shaped by

diverse socioeconomic, religious, and cultural elements. According to Yeseibo (2017) “The practice of FGM continues to thrive in most communities in Africa, especially in Nigeria in spite of the efforts of government agencies, non-governmental organizations and other health bodies at eliminating all forms of cultural violence against women (p.131). Female genital mutilation is widely condemned due to the harm it inflicts on a woman's sensitive anatomy. While some progress has been made in curtailing this practice, it still persists in subtle and insidious forms, undermining the achievements in reducing its prevalence. Toubia (1995) says that:

Globally, at least 2 million girls a year are at the risk of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) – approximately 6000 a day. Overall an estimated 85 to 114 million girls and women in the world are genetically mutilated. At present, FGM is reportedly practiced in at least twenty-six African countries... the women and girls experience pains, trauma, and (frequently) severe physical problems such as bleeding, infections or even death (p.224).

In ancient times, married young women were subjected to the horrendous practice of clitoral mutilation. The worst is that the act occurred when the young wife was heavily pregnant, just before giving birth. The distressing consequence of this practice for some young women often led to fatal bleeding, while survivors faced the permanent loss of a fulfilling sex life. The traumatic experience of this encounter with the knife on such a vital and sensitive organ could result in lifelong psychological distress, leaving some women sexually impaired. Female genital mutilation often originates from sociocultural norms shaped by diverse socioeconomic, religious, and cultural elements. Hence, the perspectives on FGM can differ significantly, influenced by the specific culture and tradition of a given society. In some African societies, FGM is seen as an ancient ritual, deeply entrenched in cultural beliefs and often framed within rites of passage. According to Zabuz (2008) “Excision was and is still a rite of passage performed on woman and by women in Sub-Saharan Africa, the Mashreq and various other countries, regardless of their social rank or religious allegiance. It marks the initiation of the girl child, aged between four and fifteen into adulthood (p.27). Commenting on the issue, Okoh (2006) says that:

Clitoridectomy as indeed circumcision among the Jews is a bodily mutilation, viewed somehow as the condition sine qua non for receiving a complete religious and moral education. As a rite of passage, therefore, the ceremony initiates girls into the community's way of life. It bestows on the initiates, a sense of responsibility and also of social belonging in the overall social activities of the people. It is regarded as a status determinant and a stepping stone to other social activities of the people. For only the initiate is eligible to claim her rights in the community, undergo other rites of passage and climb to the apex of the social ladder as the case may be. For these reasons, any woman who is uncircumcised is not only subjected to frequent embarrassing innuendos from other women, reminding her of her precarious status in the community, looked down upon by women younger than herself, and virtually remains a social outcast for life (p.38)

Studies have equally shown that the fact infants also undergo excision indicates that the practice is no longer linked only to initiation into adulthood. Van Gennep (1960) says that “excision is in some cases, no longer a puberty rite and functions as a deritualized practice, especially in societies where symbolic puberty precedes psychological puberty “ (p.13). In some African societies, female genital mutilation is given a religious undertone. Okoh (2006) notes that:

among the Ibo in Ezzra community as well as in Afikpo of Ebonyi state, male and female circumcision are believed to bring about solidarity between the community and the earth spirit”. Hence, they are performed at specially designated locations such as the shrine of the goddess of fertility located in a grove in a neighbouring forest or in the family barn behind the house regarded as the habitat of the goddess of fertility. This is done in the hope that earth goddess will bless the initiate with many offsprings (p.39)

On another hand, This cultural practice, identified as female genital mutilation, is allegedly carried out to control what is perceived as women's excessive sexual desire and to prevent childbirth complications associated with the clitoris. According to Kolawole and Kwaak (2021) “One of the reasons for FGM is to ensure respectability of a woman, thus enhancing her chances of marriage and getting a better bride price. This is more important in Southern Nigeria where FGM is linked with preservation of virginity. In Nigeria, just like Sudan, FGM practice reduced as social status and level of education increased” (p.3). There is also a cultural belief that female genital mutilation contributes significantly in the maintenance of women's good health. It is thought to alleviate conditions such as melancholia, hysteria, insanity, epilepsy, and even kleptomania. Infact, Mandara (2004) says that “the gishiri cut, an incision on the vaginal wall made with a razor blade or penknife is performed commonly as a cure for a variety of ailments including obstructed labour, amenorrhea, infertility, pruritus vulvae and others” (p. 98).

In Ekwierhoma's literary work, *The Cut Across*, the focus is on sensitizing institutions, communities and individuals about the dangers of female circumcision, with the aim to bring an end to this harmful cultural practice entirely. The play advocates the need for women to reclaim control over their sexuality without unwarranted societal interference. Against the backdrop of cultural norms and entrenched gender roles, Mabel Ekwierhoma's *The Cut Across* discusses the delicate issue of FGM with a narrative finesse that demands attention. Beyond its theatrical aesthetics, *The Cut Across*, serves as a catalyst for discourse, offering a space to confront and challenge prevailing beliefs, and norms surrounding FGM. Through this exploration, this study endeavors to shed light on the transformative role of theatre as a vehicle for advocacy, empathy, and social change.

Theoretical Framework

Feminism, as a theoretical framework, provides a perspective through which scholars and researchers can analyze and critique oppressive societal structures, norms, and practices, particularly those that contribute to the subjugation of women. In the context of this study, feminism offers valuable insights into understanding the gender dynamics at play. Nutsukpo (2020) says that “The feminist theatre is an avenue through which feminist playwrights highlight women's role expectations and their struggles in the socio-

economic and political spheres of society” (p.32).

The social structure in African society is patriarchal, characterized by systems that subjugate women. Feminist theatre serves as a medium through which feminist writers can reveal these structures and their negative impacts on women, aiming to eradicate them. Derr (2019) says that feminist theatre “... provides an alternative not just to the male gaze but also to the normative gaze by intervening in cultural assumptions about identity, dismantling binaries, and creating equality” (p.14). This is evident in Mabel Ekwierhoma’s play, *The Cut Across*. Considering this, feminism, which aims to eliminate various forms of women’s oppression, is employed as the theoretical framework for this study. Chukwuma (1994) characterizes African feminism as inclusive, encompassing both the contemporary, educated woman and the uneducated, rural traditional woman. She goes on to say that:

... African feminism is dictated and informed from within, from African social realities that obtain ... it is accommodationist not exclusive and negativistic. Men remain a vital part of women’s lives ... African feminism is progressive in its full commitment to developing women intellectually, educationally, economically, while still retaining the nucleus of the home. (p.xiv).

African feminism strives for a collaborative relationship between men and women while also advocating for the dismantling of structures that subjugate women. On the contrary, radical feminists take a militant stance, they see patriarchy—the widespread oppression of women by men as deeply ingrained in men’s consciousness, making its elimination challenging. According to radical feminists, men’s power and authority stem from the prevailing social status granted by patriarchy, sustaining gender inequality. Consequently, radical feminists assert that dismantling patriarchy and its suppressive structures requires a revolution in the social order. They employ potent tools such as consciousness-raising groups to raise awareness about women’s oppression and organize public protests to advocate for women’s rights.

In applying feminism as a theoretical framework to the study of female genital mutilation in Mabel Ekwierhoma’s play, *The Cut Across* allows for a comprehensive analysis of the cultural, social, and gender dynamics at play. It enables a critical examination of how cultural practices can serve as vessels for women’s oppression, while also acknowledging the agency and resistance within the narrative.

Dismantling Patriarchal Structures through Representations of Female Genital Mutilation in Mabel Ekwierhoma’s *The Cut Across*

Mabel Ekwierhoma’s *The Cut Across*, serves as another endeavor to raise awareness among institutions, individuals and communities about the dangers of female genital mutilation, with the aim of bringing an end to this harmful cultural practice. Premiered during the convocation ceremony of Kwara State University, Malete on February 7, 2024, the play opens with the joyous and celebratory greetings of “*Isoko wadoo; Urhobo wadoo; Itsekiri wadoo,*” which are widely recognized greetings among the Isoko, Urhobo, and Itsekiri communities of Delta State.

The play revolves around the eponymous heroine, Emu who is a victim of female genital mutilation. Within this setting, the rural Urhobo community found in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria represents a patriarchal society that is beginning to encounter the influences of Christianity and Western education as they transition

into the modern era. In the play, Ekwierhoma makes a statement that the longstanding oppressive norms, customs and traditions that have limited women over the years must be dismantled. The play unfolds in four episodes, examining the struggle for change in a typical African community where the cultural practice of Female Genital mutilation is rife. The central tension arises from the efforts of the female protagonist, Emu, aspiring to bring change to her community. In Episode One, titled *The Return*, Emu, who has been away from her community for several years returns and is really devastated to find out that there has been no meaningful development in her community since she travelled to the whiteman’s land. She wonders” ...Is there still no pipe borne water in the community? Hmmm...None of them would recognize me. It’s been a while. I’m sure most, if not all of the girls have gone under the notorious blade. (*Looks around*) Now where is this sister of mine? (p.10)

Here, Ekwierhoma draws our attention to a rural community that is still technologically backward coupled with its reliance on their obsolete and outmoded way of life. Emu’s safe return to the village is been celebrated with traditional drumming and dancing. Emu is a victim of genital mutilation, a tradition that has left her with a blunt clitoris, making it difficult for her to experience the pleasures of sex. Despite relocating abroad on a scholarship and marrying, she decides to take a stand against this harmful cultural practice that stripped her of a vital part of her womanhood. When she shares her intention with her mother, Oni Emu, expressing her desire to end the practice, her mother’s initial concern is whether Emu’s husband is complaining. Oni Emu does not see any reason for Emu’s insistence on questioning the tradition of her people, but her daughter sees the culture of her people as a repressive one, which is inimical to women’s struggle for freedom. For instance, upon the demise of her husband, the culture of her people requires Oni Emu to get married to her late husband’s brother, but she blatantly refuses to do so. So as not to incur the wrath of the elders, she begs Emu her daughter not to cause new problems by talking about female genital mutilation, an obsolete traditional practice in the community. She says “They will accuse me of instigating you against tradition, having resisted being inherited by your cousin’s father...” (p.15). Oni Emu’s plea does not go down well with her daughter, who believes that every woman has a right to her body. In her play, *The Cut Across*, Mabel Ekwierhoma empowers the female protagonist to take a leading role in challenging and abolishing the longstanding tradition of female circumcision, which she views as a tool of male oppression. Female circumcision involves the removal of parts or entire organs of the female genitalia, often carried out with unsterilized instruments such as knives or razor blades. The cultural justifications for this practice vary across Nigeria, ranges from viewing it as a cleansing ritual from evil spirits to considering it a female rite of passage, a safeguard for a woman’s chastity and marriage prospects, or a means to enhance fertility or male sexual pleasure. Emu, however, is resolute in her mission, feeling a responsibility to protect other young girls from having their futures stolen by this oppressive and superstitious tradition. Emu, eventually, decides to deal with this evil tradition by educating her village friends. She tells Efe “I hope I could take you with me so you’ll escape that brutal practice of genital cutting with those dirty blades and crude instruments in a dirty environment...(p.22). When she tells her plans to her village friends, her own female cousin, Esiri, not only opposes her but manipulates the situation, leading to a confrontation between Emu and her uncle, Pa Emuotor. As the family patriarch, Pa Emuotor, a

man deeply rooted in the tradition of his people, rejects Emu's mission, considering it misguided and ill-advised. He, like other staunch traditionalists, refuses to see the necessity for change, insisting on passing down the tradition to future generations. Pa Emuotor is particularly displeased with Emu due to her mother, Oni Emu, rejecting his advances after his brother's death.

Things start going worse for Oni Emu and her daughter, when Pa Emuotor's wife, Oni Esiri shows up. Pa Emuotor's wife, Oni Esiri, wrongly believes that Oni Emu is making love advances at her husband, leading her to antagonize Oni Emu at every opportunity. Esiri exaggerates Emu's intentions and informs Pa Emuotor that Emu has decided to take legal action against him if he continues to promote female circumcision in the community. This revelation triggers a conflict between the uncle and niece. Initially involved, the friends invited by Pa Emuotor eventually withdraw, suggesting that it is a family matter for Pa Emuotor to handle. Pa Emuotor is faced with a dilemma over his determined niece who has returned from abroad. Despite facing opposition from the elders of the community, Emu remains steadfast in her avowed campaign against female genital mutilation. Some of Emu's mother's friends in the market also turn against her for allowing her daughter to challenge long-standing traditions. They accuse her of permitting her defiant daughter to influence the village girls with a streak of stubbornness that could disrupt the community's peace, as seen in their conversation:

ONI EFE: (Pointing at ONI EMU) Mother of the child that uses the left hand to point at her father's house. The oil on one finger easily smears the others. Emu has corrupted my daughter (44).

OMAFUVWE: Are you sure that she has not been bewitched? It is not wrong to cut a woman's genitals. Was her own not cut? Did she not reap the benefits? It was done before us, it is still being done and it shall continue to be done.

MIYERI: Yes, done and done and done (p.44)

Here, Ekwierhoma illustrates the predicament that uncircumcised women in patriarchal society suffer in the hands of their fellow women for trying to deviate from the tradition. This representation is not peculiar to Ekwierhoma's play. Julie Okoh in her play, *In the Fullness of Time*, uses Esele and her mother to show the challenges faced by uncircumcised women in a patriarchal society. Esele's mother, under pressure from her mother-in-law, was forced to have Esele undergo circumcision. However, during a critical moment, it was revealed that Esele's mother, originally from another village, had never been circumcised herself. Immediately, she was expelled from the community, accused of defiling her husband's bed and bringing shame to the family.

In Ekwierhoma's play, *The Cut Across*, Emu's mother bears the taunts, but a few individuals support her and Emu. Clearly, Oni Efe and women of her age group are custodians of tradition and culture and as such, staunch advocates of patriarchal values which they believe sustain their society. Oni Efe is, therefore, a strong promoter of female circumcision despite the devastating consequences that many families, hers inclusive, have experienced. In most cases, most of the harmful cultural practices surrounding FGM are carried out by women against their own fellow women. Akaenyi (2024) says that:

In recent years, there has been growing recognition of the prevalence of intragender subjugation, particularly among women. Despite the strides made by feminist movements in recent years, women continue to face a range of challenges in their pursuit of gender equality. While patriarchal structures and male dominance have been identified as major contributors to the subjugation of women, this overlooks the ways in which women themselves can perpetuate gender subjugation, including against their own gender (p.150)

Oni Efe regards Emu's boldness as a challenge to the cultural practices of the community. But Emu refuses to be cowed into submission although she is very much aware of what tradition requires of her as a woman, wife and mother. Already, some community elders have lodged complaints against Emu for disturbing the peace with her anti-female genital mutilation campaign. This compels the paramount ruler to summon everyone to a meeting at the town square. At the gathering, charges are presented against Emu before the paramount ruler. When he gives Emu the chance to present her defense, she seizes the opportunity to articulate the irrationality of the practice and highlights how their community is being perceived as backward compared to others that have abandoned the tradition. Demonstrating a logical prowess in argument, Emu stresses the need to curtail this harmful cultural practice among her people. She says:

EMU: Great Lion, father of the community, what is at stake puzzles the world. The world is amazed that we continue an act that maims women for life. The statistics on the dead, whose demise were blamed on household enemy or witches, the disfigured, barren and sick women whose lives the cutters have reshaped are at stake. What more can I say? There are infections and diseases transmitted by the unsterilized blades and they are dismissed by our people as common ailments (p.58).

Here, Emu has exposed the ignorance of her people who are continuously relying on divination and attributing the cause of many ailments to spiritual force. Emu's argument on the need to jettison the tradition of female genital mutilation is well received by the paramount ruler, who stresses that it is time to discard antiquated customs, as everything has its appropriate moment. The outcome of the enlightenment on the dangers of female circumcision by Emu prompts the decision by the paramount ruler never to allow the practice again. Therefore, he carefully considers Emu's words in light of his knowledge and delivers a verdict that brings joy to the populace, although individuals like Pa Emuotor find it difficult to accept the decision.

Mabel Ekwierhoma vividly illustrates the consequences of this detrimental cultural norm in the play. While the elder women, exemplified by Oni Efe, remain oblivious to the harm associated with circumcision despite its tragic outcomes, such as the loss of young girls' lives, Emu perceives it as a destructive influence. This contrast highlights a discord between the older generation, advocating for the persistence of the cultural practice, and the younger generation, who regard the tradition as obsolete, irrelevant, and harmful. Mabel Ekwierhoma creates Emu as the new woman, who challenges the longstanding cultural practice, which hitherto many women have been silent about, despite their displeasure of the practice. Emu's exposure to Western education empowers her by imparting knowledge, leading to her liberation and strength. Supported by resilient female characters in the play,

and through unwavering dedication to their mission, the women successfully influence the men to eliminate the practice of circumcision from their community. She is determined to eradicate the practice even though she is faced with several challenges. Emu struggles to liberate herself from the obnoxious customs and traditions of her people. She is a modern, educated woman who is prepared to liberate herself from oppression. She represents the robust female character that Ezenwanebe considers essential in contemporary African drama. For Emu, female circumcision is obsolete and must be abolished. Emu feels that most traditional institutions disempowered women and slowed down the pace of their total emancipation. The playwright uses the flashback method to allow the audience or the readers gain insight into dangers of female genital mutilation. In a flashback, Emu tells the pathetic story about Awesuo, a heavily pregnant woman in labour, who was forcefully circumcised as she was about delivering a child. She was cut and badly too, and by the time her baby was to be born, it was so tired and the birth attendant had no experience to handle her case. Awesuo was pushed in a wheel barrow for miles across the forest to the dispensary. By the time, Onoriode, her husband and his age grades arrives the dispensary, lifting her on their shoulders, Awesuo could not push out her child because of the damage cutting did to her. The child died inside his mother's womb and her husband abandoned her. Judging from Awesuo's devastating experience, it is clear that tradition is perpetuated to suppress women. Undaunted by the prevailing circumstances, Emu goes ahead to fight for what she believes in. Nutsukpo (2020) says that "female genital mutilation "symbolizes African women's oppression through debilitating traditional norms, values and practices" (p.30). Therefore, Emu, the female protagonist in Ekwierhoma's play does not spare words at all in condemning what she sees as barbaric practice that has no place in the 21st century.

Conclusion

This study highlights the need for a deliberate effort towards stamping out the menace of Female Genital Mutilation. Through the feminist lens, Mabel Ekwierhoma's uses her creative work *The Cut Across* to examine the psychological, physical and social effects of female genital mutilation on its victims. The writer, therefore calls on both men and women, old and young to put an end to this harmful cultural practice as it negates the rights and dignity of women. Mabel Ekwierhoma recognizes the fact that the struggle for women's freedom and gender equality can only be achieved with the eradication of the traditional structures, values, laws and customs that cage, suppress and stifle the growth of women. Therefore, she strives to actualize this change and social transformation by employing the transformative potentials of the theatre.

It is evident that the power of theatrical storytelling extends far beyond the confines of the stage. Mabel Ekwierhoma's poignant narrative not only sheds light on the silent suffering endured by women subjected to female genital mutilation (FGM) but also serves as a catalyst for broader conversations surrounding gender, cultural norms, and human rights. Through a careful analysis of the play's characters, dialogue, and symbolism, the intricate layers of meaning embedded within *The Cut Across* is exposed. The playwright's deliberate choices in portraying the physical and emotional consequences of FGM offer a nuanced perspective, challenging audiences to confront the uncomfortable truths surrounding this deeply rooted practice. The characters, brought to

life on stage, become vessels for the voices often stifled by societal norms, urging us to rethink the silence that has shrouded the issue for too long. Therefore, it is apparent that *The Cut Across* is not merely a piece of entertainment; it is a form of activism in itself. The play engages with the complexities of FGM, encouraging dialogue and introspection. It acts as a mirror reflecting the harsh realities faced by those affected by the practice and challenges us to question the status quo. Moreover, this study underscores the transformative potential of theater as a tool for advocacy and social change. Ekwierhoma's play, *The Cut Across* exemplifies how the arts can serve as a powerful medium for raising awareness, fostering empathy, and instigating societal reflection. By placing FGM at the center of the narrative, Ekwierhoma has opened a space for conversation, inviting audiences to grapple with uncomfortable truths and work towards dismantling the silence surrounding this pervasive issue. In essence, there is a profound appreciation for the role of drama in amplifying the voices of the silenced. Ekwierhoma's *The Cut Across* stands not only as a theatrical masterpiece but as a testament to the potential of storytelling to provoke thought, inspire action, and ultimately contribute to the dismantling of the silent suffering associated with female genital mutilation.

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