EXCISING THE SPIRITUAL, PHYSICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL SELF: AN ANALYSIS OF FEMALE CIRCUMCISION IN THE WORKS OF FLORA NWAPA, NGUGI WA THIONGO, AND ALICE WALKER

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ABSTRACT

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This work is a study of female circumcision in Flora Nwapa's Efuru, Ngugi wa Thiongo's The River Between, and Alice Walker's Possessing The Secret of Joy. First of all, in order to contextualize the works, there is a lengthy section about female circumcision in its three main forms, and an interpretation of the events that have led to the maintenance of the ritual.

It is notable that the issue of female circumcision is presented in vastly different manners by each author. Each of the presentations of ritual will be analyzed. It is not, however, the attempt of this study to assess the practice of female circumcision, but it is to present the reader with the major arguments for and against female circumcision, to assist one in understanding the complexity of the issues surrounding its maintenance, and allow for individual interpretations. Each work will be analyzed specifically, and references will be made to the other works throughout, particularly in the study of the final novel, Alice Walker's Possessing The Secret of Joy.

The conclusion of this work will discuss, briefly, some of my own queries and feelings of ambiguity about female circumcision which developed as a result of this study.

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated with love and empathy to all the women who have, with or without their knowledge or consent, participated in the ritual of female circumcision. I also dedicate this work to the memory of one who started out with me on the road to achieving this goal, but who did not live to see the fulfillment of a dream, my first husband, Richard Curtis Strong.

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INTRODUCTION

The idea of the ritual of female circumcision may seem almost totally incomprehensible and completely illogical for most individuals reared in Western societies because even though, for religious as well as medical reasons, male circumcision is quite common and even "required" in Jewish communities, the circumcision of women is almost never discussed or practiced. But with the 1992 publication of Alice Walker's, Possessing the Secret of Joy, the discussion of this ritual has been brought to the forefront of literary, political, and social conversations on women's rights and the place of traditional ceremonies. The issue of female circumcision is a difficult question filled with ambiguity, and it is also a matter which raises much controversy not only because of the physical, emotional, and psychological consequences of the operations for women, but also because of the ritual importance in communities that have been, literally and ideologically, "stripped" down to their "black skins" since the genesis of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and the occupation of Africa by the colonials.

In many cultures which practice female circumcision, such as the Gikuyu in Kenya, authors such as Jomo Kenyatta (who was the first Kenyan to serve as President after colonization) has

stated that "clitoridectomy, like Jewish circumcision, is a mere bodily mutilation which, however, is regarded as the sine qua non of the whole teaching of tribal law, religion, and morality" (Facing Mount Kenya, 133), and he maintains that its "abolition" will "mean to the Gikuyu the abolition of the whole institution" (134, Kenyatta's emphasis). He continues:

> The abolition of irua (female circumcision) will destroy the tribal symbol which identifies the age-groups, and prevent the Gikuyu from perpetuating that spirit of collectivism and national solidarity which they have been able to maintain from time immemorial. (134, Kenyatta's emphasis)

Thus, one may understand that to cultures such as this one which have been physiologically, spiritually, and psychologically stripped of such a vast number of their traditions, the people may feel that there is a need to preserve this custom in order to retain their ethnicity.

Walker, however, presents an indepth analysis of not only the physiological consequences of this genital operation, but also the psychological trauma experienced by one fictional Olinkan woman, Tashi, who feels it is her tribal duty to submit herself to the "tsungas" knife (Walker's word). And in her analysis, she deconstructs the arguments presented by those like Kenyatta based on the startling medical evidence which articulates the pain suffered by women who undergo ritual female circumcision. The circumcision will 'scar' Tashi mentally, physically, spiritually, psychologically, and sexually for the remainder of her life, until she can find no

peace, no 'joy'. Only after the death of her circumcisor can Tashi regain a sense of control and wholeness in her being. It is quite apparent that though Walker is able to discuss the complexity of some of the consequences of female circumcision, she also refuses, to participate in any real discussion of the social, political, and tribal significance of the ceremony because the repercussions of the operations are simply too devastating for women, in her view, to entertain any ideology that would support the continuance of the ritual.

It is quite interesting that Walker addresses the idea of female circumcision from a psychological and physiological perspective, while other writers of fiction on this subject, mainly African, including Nigerian writer Flora Nwapa and Kenyan author Ngugi Wa Thiongo, have discussed the issue in a considerably different manner than Walker. Notably, Ngugi has confronted the ritual as not only a life-altering experience, but more particularly as a rite which became emblematic of the divisions in the community after colonization and the marked influence of Christian missionaries. And in her discussion, Nwapa describes the operation as an accepted (and expected) part of woman's life, but it is also apparent from her work that the operation will forever change the life of the main character Efuru.

This Dissertation will discuss the works of each of these writers, and their different interpretations and presentations of the ritual of female circumcision. It is my hope that the

reader of this work will be able, upon completion, to understand the significance of the ritual from a cultural context, while recognizing the very real issue of the loss of the human rights of women in societies which continue to practice the ceremony.

It is most important, I feel, to "read" the ritual from an "African" perspective, while acknowledging that some of the major issues of the ritual are discussed only by a writer with a "Western" perspective and interpretation of the rite which, although problematic, addresses the serious repercussions and implications of the ritual, while the two African novels do not confront these very difficult issues in any indepth manner.

Chapter One of this work will focus on a discussion of Flora Nwapa's novel Efuru. In Nwapa's novel, Efuru, the title character undergoes this "bath" (the word Nwapa uses to denote circumcision) shortly after her marriage. This is notably different from Walker and Ngugi's presentation of the rite because within their respective works, the ceremony is viewed as a "rite of passage" from adolescence into adulthood. A cursory reading of the novel would suggest that the rite is presented in a 'matter of fact' manner, without a serious discussion of the effects (except physical) on the young woman. However, some interesting questions are presented. For example, does Efuru use the goddess of the sea, Uhamiri, as an escape from the physical and psychological consequences of her

'bath' (circumcision)? Is it the actual surgery that causes Efuru to have great difficulty in conceiving? Why is this issue obscured in other critical evaluations, even evaluations that seem to confront the novel from a "feminist" point of view? Reading the novel under the guise of the constructed female reader, I would like to investigate these and other issues with the help of feminist critics Dorothy Dinnerstein, Judith Fetterely, Patrocinio P. Schweickart, and others.

Upon this closer, 'female' reading of the novel, one may note that the title character remains one of the only 'independent' and 'free' women in at the end of the work because of her eventual escape into a spiritual world. I would like to investigate this idea, and also the reasons why Walker addresses the issue in such a disparate way from Nwapa. For example, why does Tashi feel it necessary to kill her operator? Is it simply be because of her introduction to Western religious values, or are there other, more complex reasons? Why does Efuru come not only to love, but also respect the woman (her mother-in-law) who not only arranges the ritual, but also demands that it be performed as soon as possible. I have similar queries in reference to Ngugi's presentation of female circumcision.

Chapter Two will focus on a discussion of Ngugi wa Thiongo's novel, The River Between. In his novel, Ngugi Wa Thiongo focuses on the social and political consequences faced by a community which, is divided by the issue of

clitoridectomy, particularly after the arrival of Christian missionaries, and the children who are caught in the crossfire. Ngugi adds yet another interesting element to the discussion--the Christian ethic--and how the idea of female circumcision as "sin" factored into the lives of the people living on opposite sides of the river--ideologically and literally. Ngugi's character Muthoni, like Tashi, feels tribally obligated to undergo this rite; however, she does not physically survive the trauma, and a few weeks after the ceremony she dies, but not before proclaiming herself to be a true Gikuyu "woman." It is apparent that the Christian missionaries came to Africa with preconceived notions about the inferiority and barbarity of the African people and their customs. This 'prejudice' will be a large focus of the discussion. I will investigate this issue of prejudice utilizing the critical lens of Hans-Georg Gadamer, and his discussion of prejudice in the work, Truth and Method.

Chapter Three will focus on a discussion of Alice Walker's novel, Possessing the Secret of Joy. Although the novels of Nwapa and Ngugi are beautifully written, and both present the reader with portraits of African life in conflict and turmoil in the modern era, it seems that there are interesting discussions omitted from their works. Only after reading Walker's novel did I feel that I had found the "complete" stories of Nwapa's Efuru and Ngugi's Muthoni. Ngugi's and Nwapa's works explore different elements of the

lives of women and girls who undergo the rite of circumcision and how they survive (or do not survive) in their respective communities, but Walker brings another important issue into the conversation--the psychological anguish of one woman who is never able to fully recover from her operation. After reading Walker's novel, I could understand the pain, the joy, the search for belonging and acceptance, and the pressures women in these communities faced daily to undergo the ritual, and most of all, the consequences of the individual actions and "choices" faced by these women.

Walker seems also, in Possessing the Secret of Joy, to remove herself from the world of the "womanist," who is interested in the survival of the whole of people, into the world of the "feminist" who is interested only in the survival the of woman and self. This is a matter that merits discussion in this work. Also, utilizing the work of Laurent Jenny, and his discussion of "intertextuality," I will discuss the "transformation" of the characters presented by Nwapa and Ngugi into the Walker's Tashi. There is a definitive connection between Walker's work and the works of her predecessors, but she does not allow her analysis to become merely a stifled re-presentation of the earlier novels. The "Conclusion" of this work will attempt to analyze my own position as a reader and my evolution of understanding of the ritual and hose who participate in the ceremonies.

It is not my purpose to present a judgmental approach to this practice. However, I must admit that as a woman and the mother of two small female children, I was fascinated and I wanted to understand what would make a woman submit herself or her child (or any other female) to what I consider a terrifying experience. In order for myself and my readers to gain a better understanding of this ritual, an historic presentation is in order.

CHAPTER ONE
FEMALE CIRCUMCISION: AN HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

From the information gathered, I have found that there are at least three different types of female circumcisions--ranging from the "mild" to the very "extreme." Asma El Dareer notes in her work, Woman, Why Do You Weep: Circumcision and Its Consequences, that these three categories are referred to as the Pharonic, the Sunna, and the Intermediate. The Pharonic circumcision, also known as "Infibulation," is the "oldest and most prevalent type" performed. She also notes that there are two types of the Pharonic surgery,

> the classical and the modernized. The former consists of removal of the clitoris, labia minora and labia majora with the two sides of the wound being brought together by different methods...In Western Sudan sometimes adhesives substances, sometimes thorns, and sometimes strings are used. The girls legs are bound together in three places--at the ankle; above the knees; and round the thighs--for a period varying from 15 to 40 days, with the aim of limiting movement to allow proper healing. The main objective is to make the opening as tight as possible. Sometimes, to ensure tightness, a thorn is inserted into the vagina so that when the tissue heals, only this opening will remain...The modern type consists of removal of the clitoris, labia minora and most of the anterior parts of the labia majora; the two sides are then brought together by stitching with cat gut or silk. (1-2)

The second type, the Sunna, is considered the "mildest" because it "consists of removing only the tip of the prepuce of the clitoris" and is considered similar to the male

circumcision. (Note: This operation is also referred to by some as a clitoridectomy, see Olayinka Koso-Thomas, The Circumcision of Women: A Strategy For Eradication.) The third type, the "Intermediate" form of circumcision, according to El Dareer, was adopted after legislation outlawing the Pharonic circumcision was passed in 1946 in The Sudan (although she notes that Pharonic circumcisions continue in The Sudan). This operation was "invented" by midwives; she notes that "This operation entails removal of the clitoris, anterior parts or whole of the labia minora, and slices, or more, of labia minora. The two sides are then stitched together leaving a variable opening which is sometimes the same as that of Pharonic" (3-4). According to El Dareer's study, over 80% of the women interviewed had undergone the most severe form of circumcision--the Pharonic or Infibulation, while only 2.5% of her participants had undergone the Sunna circumcision, the mildest form of the operation.

HISTORY

I must, first of all, acknowledge the mental and spiritual difficulty of reading material that describes and defines, in graphic detail, the circumcision of women, as well as the difficulty of viewing, for the first time, a circumcised "vagina" (or what I could see was left of it). El Dareer's study was not only insightful, but particularly moving as she prefaced her work with these words:

> I was circumcised in 1960, at the age of 11 years. I remember every detail of

> that operation, and that the worst part was when the wound became infected and I had to be given five injections of penicillin by the operator, a qualified nurse. From that time I began to think, to wonder why girls are circumcised and to learn more about it. (iii)

Not only as a woman reared in a Judeo-Christian home, but also as a Western woman educated in the age of "womanism" and "feminism," knowing that this ritual was (and still is) being practiced on women who would be my contemporaries (and possibly my daughters) is numbing, and I cannot imagine having the operation performed on myself or my children. With that in mind, however, I proceed. El Dareer notes from an historical perspective that the "circumcision of women was practiced in Ancient Egypt, as the evidence of female mummies from 200 BC has demonstrated (iii). Also, in a recent study of circumcision in the Sudan, Hanny Lightfoot-Klein, an educator and family counselor who studied this topic over a six-year period while traveling through The Sudan, Kenya, and Egypt, writes that

> Pharonic circumcision in the Nile Valley is as old as recorded history. To this date (August 1989), it distinguishes 'decent' and respectable women from unprotected prostitutes and slaves, and it carries with it the only honorable, dignified, and protected status that is possible for a woman there. (375)

Thus, it is evident not only from these sources, but also from a newspaper article as recent as January 1993, when a Gambian woman was jailed in Paris for having the operation performed on her two small daughters, that this practice is a part of

the oldest recorded history, and it remains a part of the most modern of African and Islamic histories. (Although the article notes that there is no law in France against female circumcision, the author, Marlise Simon does state that case was presented because the "prosecutors (were able to) argue that the ritual violates a law against the mutilation of children" (New York Times, January 17, 1993). But these facts do not explain the purpose of the practice of female circumcision. There are several reasons noted for the practice and continuation of this custom.

TRADITION

One of the main rationales given for the continuation of clitoridectomies is tradition. Many Africans felt (as is voiced in the words of young Tashi and Muthoni) that in order for Africa to retain any part of its cultural heritage, people in countries like The Sudan and Kenyatta's Gikuyu in Kenya feel that they must continue the ancient practices. As El Dareer suggests,

> tradition was the primary reason for retention of the circumcision of women offered by women themselves and the secondary reason offered by men. In a country such as the Sudan, where social pressures are strong, traditional practices are taken for granted; it does not occur to any one to question them; traditions are complied with because they are firmly woven into the social fabric. (67-69)

Similarly, Olayinka Koso-Thomas, who is a doctor from Freetown, Sierre Leone, notes in her work, The Circumcision of Women: a Strategy For Eradication, that

> to belong to one's ethnic group and be identified with that group carries certain obligations which one is expected to meet before being accepted as a full member of that group...In some communities circumcision is the ritual which confers the full social acceptability and integration upon the females. Without it, they become estranged from their own kith and kin and may lose their right to contribute to, or participate in, the community life of their homeland, to own property, to vote, or be voted for. (8)

Thus, these young women face much social pressure from those who wish to uphold the tribal and communal traditions, and they feel obligated and honored, at times, to remain true to the customs of their ancestors. One must realize that the 'choice' (which has become the popular North American term in the argument over abortion) to be circumcised is not merely an option for these women, but it is a matter of survival because one may become a social and familial outcast if she does not submit willingly to this rite.

INITIATION

Elizabeth Williams-Moen's notes in her study, "Female Genital Mutilation: Everywoman's Problem" that "Genital mutilation is also associated with initiation rites, especially in sub-Saharan Africa" (5). This initiation is considered comparable to male initiation and circumcision, and is usually performed on pubescent females. It is also used as

an 'initiation' or 'preparation' for marriage, as Williams-Moen further suggests that "excision and infibulation is accompanied by instruction in marital duties and homemaking skills." She also emphasizes that there seems to be controversy concerning the use of the word "initiation" in association with the rite of circumcision on a woman who is about to be or already is married because "initiation," in most forms, takes place when children are about to reach, or are just beginning puberty.

Williams-Moen's states that those who wish to continue this practice suggest that the females who undergo the rite are not only willing but happy to participate:

> in response to mounting criticism of excision in that society, (Jomo Kenyatta has) devoted an entire chapter to the initiation rite. Like many defenders of genital mutilation, he states that the young girls look forward to the day and want to undergo initiation...The girls are brought up to look forward to this event; they are told they will have special food, clothes, and ornaments, and will be the center of village attention. (6)

However, upon reading Kenyatta's work, I have come to a different conclusion than that of Williams-Moen. I did not find in Kenyatta's argument that the girls "look forward" to the ceremony, but instead he notes that they are taught, and feel that it is a necessary part of their transformation from childhood to womanhood. Kenyatta does note that the girls are "put on a special diet" prior to the operation, but he also states that this is to "prevent the loss of blood at the time

of initiation (physical operation) and also to ensure immediate healing of the wound, as well as a precaution against blood poisoning" (136). In the Gikuyu society, Kenyatta further notes that the young woman undergoes the operation with other members of her "age-group," and it is the beginning of her official entry and exposure to the adult side of Gikuyu life. Kenyatta further states that

> it is important to note that the moral code of the tribe is bound up with this custom and that it symbolises the unification of the whole tribal organisation. This is the principal reason why irua (female circumcision) plays such an important part in the life of the Gikuyu people. (134, Kenyatta's emphasis)

Thus Kenyatta's position is not merely based on the idea of female circumcision as a way to oppress women, but it is a traditional way to bring "women" into the adult world of the Gikuyu.

Interestingly, I have found in my research (in the literature and the writings of Awa Thiam, author of Speak Out, Black Sisters and Asma El Dareer), that many women who have undergone circumcision have done so in "secrecy" and it has been, as Evelyne Acaad notes in her work on the Muslim tradition, Veil of Shame: The Role of Women in the Contemporary Fiction of North Africa and the Arab World, much more an act of "degradation" for these young women, rather than a celebratory instance. Recounting her own experience

with circumcision, Nawal el Saadawi writes in her work, The Hidden Faces of Eve,

> I was six years old that night when I lay in my bed, warm and peaceful...I felt something move under the blankets, something like a huge hand...Almost simultaneously a rough hand was clapped over my mouth, to prevent me from screaming. They carried me to the bathroom...At that very moment I realized my thighs had been pulled wide apart, and that each of my lower limbs was being held as far away from the other as possible...Then suddenly the sharp metallic edge seemed to drop between my thighs and they cut off a piece of my flesh from my body. I screamed... (7-8)

Like Saadawi's own recount, El Dareer states that the operation is often performed on girls too young to consent, maybe even infants who do not nor cannot understand or appreciate the history or the tradition behind the ceremony. El Dareer and Thiam also note that many women, especially the ones who have undergone Pharonic circumcision, will have to be cut open or "deinfibulated" before they are able to have sexual intercourse with their husbands, or before they are able to give birth to a child.

RELIGION

There are also religious reasons given for the continuation of this ceremony. Thiam notes that the Koran does not sanction or require female circumcision stating that "there is no allusion to this in the Koran...which can be verified by referring to the Arabic text or to the translations into different foreign languages; however,

Belkis Wolde Giorgis notes in relation to Islam in the work, Female Circumcision in Africa, that "circumcision is (considered) a duty for both men and women; it is an ordinance for men and ennobling for women" (11). El Dareer notes also from her study that religion is the "main" reason given by men for the continuation of the practice, and the "secondary" reason given by the women. She writes, "This is mainly due to the word 'sunna' which is inaccurately used for one type of circumcision; to say that something is 'sunna' makes it unquestionable for Muslims" (71). And although Christians are adamantly opposed to the idea of female circumcision, it is noted by Belkis that male circumcision was (and still is) a "required" Jewish rite, as it was a sign of the covenant between God and Abraham (Genesis, 17). There are no direct references in the Bible to female circumcision, although there are some that believe that when Sarah "dealt harshly" with Hagar after she conceived a son for Abraham, the passage could have been referring to Sarah circumcising Hagar (Genesis, 16), noting that "A popular belief about the origin of the practice can be found in the story of Sarah and Abraham. Sarah was supposed to have had her husband's other wife excised after the relationship between the co-wives had deteriorated" (Giorgis, 11). Thiam also notes that from various interviews of leaders in Muslim communities in Black Africa, it was their belief that the practice was also a punitive measure from Sarah against her husband's younger wife, Hagar (59). After

reviewing the Biblical text, and talking to one Imam in a Black Muslim church in Lansing, MI, (who also noted that this rite is not practiced or even discussed in his church) I cannot come to the same conclusion (although I must note that though I am quite familiar with much of the text of the Bible, I do not consider myself a Biblical scholar).

As earlier suggested, it is interesting to note that although the circumcision of the male is a time for celebration and feasting in the Jewish and Islamic worlds, it is just the opposite for the female. Acaad writes: "Unlike male circumcision, which is an occasion of rejoicing and is generally a beneficial operation, female circumcision is done in secret and largely as an act of degradation (20-21)." Ama Ata Aidoo's discusses this "dirty" feeling when she became a young woman in her work, "Ghana: To Be A Woman." Hence, the woman learns quickly that anything associated with her body and her sexuality must be cut off, covered up, or made passive--even her ritual world is "dirty," secret, and sinful.

Although most of the women who are circumcised are Muslim, (El Dareer), as earlier noted, there is no evidence in the Koran that this rite is a "required" Islamic religious ceremony. Belkis writes:

> There is nothing in the Koran that justifies female circumcision, especially its most severe form, infibulation. The prophet Mohammed is said to have opposed

> the custom, since he considered it harmful to women's sexual well-being..." (12)

Despite the fact that Islam does not 'require' female circumcision, the she continues that the "official position" of Islam on the subject is as follows:

> Female circumcision is an Islamic tradition mentioned in the tradition of the prophet, and sanctioned by Imams and Jurists... We support the practice and sanction it in view of its effect on attenuating the sexual desire of women and directing it to desirable moderation. (12)

This quote also presents another reason for female circumcision: to control the sexual desire of women.

SEXUAL CONTROL

Koso-Thomas notes that the "intact clitoris" is thought to be the cause of "oversexed" women who may put "uncontrollable sexual demands on their husbands." She further notes that it is believed that extramarital affairs are the result of these oversexed women who cannot fulfill their sexual appetites in the arms of their husbands. Giorgis supports this idea in the following manner:

> The belief that uncircumcised women are apt to be promiscuous is prevalent in all societies that practice female circumcision. The Islamic tradition pays particular attention to this aspect of female sexuality. (17)

Not only in the Islamic tradition, but also the Christian, as well as in many African societies, the sexual desires of women

are extremely censured. In Biblical circumstances, Paul writes, "It is good for a man not to touch a woman. Nevertheless, to avoid fornication, let every man have his own wife, and let every woman have her own husband" (I Corinthians, 7:1-2). Buchi Emecheta notes in her novels, including The Bride Price and The Joys of Motherhood, that it is considered a disgrace if a girl is found to be "disvirgined" on her wedding night, and her family may publicly disown her and her lineage (in the case of polygamous marriages in some African societies). And one should note that although men may indulge in intercourse without censure before they marry (one can only imagine with whom as all women are to remain virgins), it is only the woman who brings shame upon her family if she is found without the intact hymen.

Extremely important to this conversation on the sexual control of women is the idea that the clitoris may represent, to some societies, "maleness", and thus in order for one to assert their "maleness," a woman must not have a clitoris. For example, Williams-Moen writes that "In West Africa genital mutilation is also important as a device to firmly establish sexuality. The clitoris is thought to represent "maleness" in the female and therefore it must be removed..." (5). Giorgis also notes that the Dogon believe that human beings possess "twin souls" when they are born, male and female, and because the clitoris represents the male portion of the female soul,

it must be excised in order for a woman to attain her full status as female. Continuing in the realm of the "myth," Thiam writes that

> The Bambara excise the clitoris on the pretext that its dagger {sic} can wound the man and even cause his death...The Nandi, for their part, have observed that girls in whom this harmful organ has not been removed, waste away and die at puberty. (74)

She continues by saying that these "myths" remain today in the Bambara community, mainly with the insistence that a woman who is not excised "resembles a boy." In the article, "Female circumcision: fighting a cruel tradition," Sue Armstrong writes that "Some believe female genitalia are unclean and cutting them purifies a woman:...or that, unless they are cut, the clitoris and the labia will grow until they hang down between a woman's knees" (44). Thus, many of the "myths" associated with the ritual are based on the "duality" of the sexes, and the desire to make certain that gender is biologically determined by the fact that a woman does not have any "appendage", however slight, that hangs from her body or that could resemble a penis.

OTHER JUSTIFICATIONS

There are several other reasons given in the literature on the subject for the continuation of female circumcisions by Koso-Thomas such as cleanliness, improved male sexual pleasure, increase of marriage opportunities, maintenance of good health, preservation of virginity, enhancement of

fertility, prevention of still-births, and some even note "aesthetic" reasons. The majority of these causes, however, are questioned in studies surrounding the physical consequences of clitoridectomies, especially in its most severe form, infibulation. El Dareer notes some short-term problems including difficulty in urination, severe to mild hemorrhaging, and infection. She also notes some of the long-term problems as follows:

> The results or effects of tight circumcision include difficult or impossible penetration and pain during intercourse, and difficulty in passing menstrual blood...Women in labor face many difficulties due to circumcision...Circumcision causes delay in the progress of labor, especially in the second stage. (38)

She further notes that all circumcised (infibulated) women must be "cut" during labor, (and sometimes before any sexual relationships may occur with their husbands) in order to provide an opening for the baby during delivery. Lightfoot-Klein also notes a 25% decrease in the fertility of women who are circumcised in her work, Prisoners of Ritual: An Odyssey into Female Genital Circumcision in Africa. It may seem obvious that these operations will not only decrease fertility, but also make sex unsatisfactory for the husband as well as the wife in many instances; however, for those reared in societies in which individuals feel that they must maintain their identity, such as the Gikuyu, this information is viewed as "suspect" and merely another means of destroying who and

what one may feel is important to his/her, or the societies' survival. Another important reason for the use of female circumcision is highlighted in this section: it is that the operation will insure female virginity prior to marriage.

VIRGINITY

Religion and tradition in many societies seem obsessed with the retention of virginity in females. Not only Islamic, but also Christian traditional values demand that the female (and the male, in Christian and Koranic doctrine) remain "intact" or untouched until the wedding night. In the Islamic world, circumcision is but one means of ensuring that the girl arrives at the marriage bed with an intact hymen. But is the argument really about virginity, or is it ultimately based on man's desire to control woman? Acaad notes:

> From early childhood, a girl is brought up in constant fear of losing her virginity. There are several psychosocial explanations for this virginity mania. There are, of course, Koranic and Biblical injunctions regarding virginity, but, in general, overrating of the hymen seems to spring from more down-to-earth concerns. In this culture a man is only convinced that he has made a wise choice if his bride brings an intact hymen to the marriage bed: he considers it evidence of exclusive possession, proof that the merchandise is brand new. Further, it means that the man is assured that his wife has had no prior sexual experience and thus will not be able to compare his performance unfavorably to that of another man. (22-23)

Therefore, although the idea of retaining virginity does have religious significance, as Acaad notes, this idea is also used in the maintenance of the patriarchy by ensuring that women will remain passive and submissive during sex and throughout the marriage, because anything else could result in her dishonoring the family and she could, in Islamic societies, be put to death by a member of her own family. In any and all cases, however, purity of mind and body remains the burden of the woman.

WOMEN AND TRADITION

One of the most interesting facts that this author encountered was that women, not men, have become the keepers of this status quo. They are the most severe critics of the young, uncircumcised women. One particularly disturbing case involves the experience of a educated woman from Mali who, after realizing the horror of her own circumcision, decided not to have the operation performed on her daughters. However, after leaving her daughters with her mother, she returned to find that her mother had had the operation performed on them in her absence (Williams-Moen). Why do women who have experienced the pain of being circumcised insist that other women, their daughters and granddaughters, undergo the same operation? Acaad discusses this phenomena in the Muslim world:

> It would seem natural that having suffered a long list of social oppression--circumcision, enforced ignorance, an arranged marriage,

> subservience to her husband and sons--she would not be a staunch supporter of the status quo when it comes to determining the course of her daughters' lives, but this is not so and could be explained in terms of the phenomena described by Simone de Beauvoir with respect to older men in Western societies and their attitudes toward compulsory military service for their sons: It will do him good...didn't I go through it?...why shouldn't he?...it will make a man out of him." In the same manner, most older women in the cultures under consideration curse the fate which caused them to be born female...Thus older women are often the firmest holders of traditional customs. (30)

Hence, because they experienced the same thing, these women feel that it will be "good" for their daughters, and they do not expect them to question their assigned roles as the "weaker" sex. Like the men de Beauvoir discusses, the women Acaad describes believe that these rituals and experiences will improve the younger generations by making them stronger, and particularly in the case of the women, better able to function in a world that has assigned them a difficult and precarious role in life. Also, noting the case of women in The Sudan, Giorgis writes that

> Where women are responsible for most of the socialization process of early childhood, they themselves perpetuate sexual inequality. (25) In the case of female circumcision, the preservation of the lineage is important to women, who are more vulnerable than men because they derive their primary source of identity and economic security from the patriarchal unit. Hayes concludes that because women have no institutionalized power or authority, they have an equal if

> not greater interest in safeguarding the lineage's position in the larger society. (17)

Thus, the literature suggests that it is financially, socially, and economically important for these women to remain loyal to the patriarchy because they presently have little or no social, political, or fiscal power. Hence, the need to maintain this ritual is not merely based on one's of traditional outlook, but it is also crucial to the actual physical survival of the community.

CLITORIDECTOMY AND THE WEST

Although this discussion has focused on the act of female circumcision in Africa and the Muslim world, it must be noted that this practice has been documented outside Africa, even as late as the 1930's in America, and Williams-Moen notes that "the procedure is being taught to medical students in England" (11) (this is in reference to a WIN--Women's International News--network report in the early 1980's). There is also evidence that suggests that these operations may have been performed on female slaves in the beginnings of gynecological surgeries. Deborah Kuhn McGregor notes in her work Sexual Surgery and the Origins of Gynecology: J. Marion Sims, His Hospital, and His Patients, that one particular disease, vesico-vaginal fistulae, was prevalent among slave women. The studies by El Dareer, Sanderson, and Koso-Thomas also note a

high instance of fistulae among women they surveyed or interviewed, who had undergone Pharonic circumcision. I will discuss this matter in-depth to show the relationship between these findings and my hypothesis about female slaves. However, first I will comment on nineteenth-century Western ideology.

In the work, The Horrors of the Half-Known Life: Male Attitudes Toward Women and Sexuality in Nineteenth Century America, G.J. Barker-Benfield notes that circumcisions were performed on American and British women as a means to prevent masturbation in young girls, as well as a way to cure nymphomania or other 'aliments' connected with female sexuality. Barker-Benfield writes that:

> Clitoridectomy was the first operation performed to check woman's mental disorder. 'Invented' by an English gynecologist in 1858, it began in America in the late 1860's and was performed at least until 1904 and perhaps until 1925. After publishing his results in 1866, the English inventor, Isaac Baker Brown, was severely censured by his profession; he died two years later , and the performance of clitoridectomy in England died with him (2). In the U.S., it coexisted with, and then was superseded by, the circumcision of females of all ages up to menopause; circumcision continued to be performed here until 1937 at least. Both clitoridectomy and circumcision aimed to check what was thought to be a growing incidence of female masturbation... (120)

Although this 1976 study notes that the practice of female circumcision "died" with its "inventor" in the 19th century, as earlier indicated, the practice was performed in Ancient

Egypt; thus, it was not 'invented' by Baker-Brown, and it still occurs in and outside of Africa today, thus the practice did not "die" with Baker-Brown, not even in England (as earlier stated evidence suggests that the operation was still being taught to medical students in the early 1980's). It is not clear why Barker-Benfield states that Baker-Brown was the "inventor" of clitoridectomy, or why he feels the operation "died" with him, (at least in England). However, one possible explanation could be that because his emphasis was only on "nineteenth-century America," and because it was not a world view of any particular ideology, he did not feel the need to elaborate on the historical aspects of circumcision outside the West. Importantly, Barker-Benfield writes that his title came from a line in Herman Melville's Moby Dick, and he continues:

> Melville's work suggests that...psychological bifurcation, and its geographical expression, had a particular significance for American men...and that the relation between the sexes corresponds to the same split. That view of Melville was the starting point of this book. Its subject is a conventional one; it is WASP males;...my focus is the nineteenth century. (xi-xii)

Therefore, if Barker-Benfield is concerned only with the WASP male in the 19th century "America", an extensive or even cursory view of clitoridectomy in other parts of the world may be unnecessary for his discussion. (Note: The information about Baker-Brown, does, notably, support an initial assertion

that the practice was used, in Western societies, to reduce or eliminate female interest in sex).

THE SLAVERY QUESTION

It is easily documented in the history of the Americas that slave women (men, and even later free blacks) were used as human "guinea pigs" for doctors experimenting with new surgical and medical procedures (McGregor). (One such notable instance has come to be known as the Tuskegee Experiment). However, the literature does not explicitly state whether or not clitoridectomies were performed on slave women. One could assume, though, that due to the historical accounts which document the use of this operation in Ancient Egypt and Africa prior to colonization and the trans-Atlantic slave trade, that many women brought to America on slave ships must have been clitorized before their arrival. Barker-Benfield notes the use of female slaves for experimentation in this manner: "Sims scoured the countryside for appropriate surgical subjects. Significantly, given the need for their endurance, passivity, and utter helplessness, they were black female slaves, some of whom Sims bought expressly for his experiments" (101). McGregor writes that Sims documents only three clitoridectomies in the history of his entire hospital in his 1877 records (239), and Barker-Benfield states that "Sims shared with Meigs the contemporary belief that woman's entire psychology was governed by her sex organs, and Sims would go on in the 1870's to perform clitoridectomy and female

castration" (96-7). Thus, the documented evidence shows that Sims did, indeed perform clitoridectomies, but the evidence is still not conclusive in reference to slave women. McGregor has documented that Sims, who is called the "father of gynecology," does, however, chronicle his use of the female slave in experimental gynecological surgery, particularly in reference to one operation that was to "aid" the slave woman with an illness associated with childbirth, vesico-vaginal fistula. She writes:

> Sims' surgery was part and parcel, then, of a fairly wide range of medical practice which concerned slave women and parturition. Slave women had a double handicap which originated in their status as medical subjects--first because they were women and second because they were slaves. Their bondage created both a vulnerability to objectification by medical men and a sometimes desperate need for improvement in health. (79)

It is because of this malady, vesico-vaginal fistula, that I would like to hypothesize that many slave women had either been circumcised before arrival in the New World, or they were victims of experimental clitoridectomies in the West. I have come to this conclusion based on the data in various studies that note that women who were Pharonically circumcised often suffered from this affliction. For example, Sanderson writes that "Some doctors have reported vesico-vaginal and recto-vaginal fistulae resulting form obstructed labor", and Lightfoot-Klein writes that "Various degrees and types of urinary obstructions are a frequent result of infibulation"

(378), while Koso-Thomas notes "post-natal complications" such as "fistulae-urinary and rectal." She further states that these "conditions are very disturbing to the patients who suffer from them. Some are very upset as they constantly smell of urine; others suffer frequent miscarriages as urine seeps through the cervical os and poisons the growing foetus" (27). Fran Hosken, a Harvard graduate who has worked as a newspaper columnist, photographer, and urban counselor, and who has traveled in at least fifteen African countries, states in her work, "Genital Mutilation of Women in Africa," that the "Retention of urine may be caused reflexly immediately after infibulation because of the fear of scalding the fresh wound" (14). El Dareer also discusses similar "obstetrical complications." She suggests that

> the continuous pressure of the baby's head causes death of the tissue, leading to fistula (abnormal passage), either between the bladder and the vagina or the vagina and the rectum. **It is found that circumcision, mainly the pharonic type is the main predisposing factor in formation of fistulae.** It is very common among Western Sudanese women, complicated because the fistula causes incontinence and an unpleasant smell...It is a very difficult condition to treat and women who suffer from it stay for long periods-even years-in hospital. (my emphasis, 38)

What is most important in this passage is El Dareer's assertion that "the pharonic type (of circumcision) is the main predisposing factor" in the formulation of fistulae. All the above noted studies have indicated some form of fistulae

or blockage as a result of infibulation or Pharonic circumcision. And, the earlier noted study by McGregor found that many plantation owners called upon Sims to treat their slaves who suffered from vesico-vaginal fistula, these "vaginal tears which had resulted form childbirth" (37), and although she does note that many women from all backgrounds suffered from this illness, (which could suggest that other women also experienced this operation) the number of cases of slave women with the condition was quite alarming, especially for those who used the black woman as "breeders' to increase the slave population on their plantations and farms. McGregor further states that the "availability of slave women as specimens for surgical experimentation allowed Sims to take the steps necessary to originate American gynecology, (79) (one can only imagine what pain, suffering and degradation this must have cost the slave woman). The study submits that, particularly in the case of Irish immigrants suffering form the illness, rickets was thought to be the main cause for the suffering, but this cause cannot be exclusively documented in the case of the female slave. From the modern studies of female circumcisions and the medical consequences of the operation, I would like to suggest that the high rate of vesico-vaginal fistulae was the result, in some part, of these types of genital operations.

In fairness to Dr. Sims, I must also acknowledge that he did perform experimental surgery on Irish female Immigrants

and some women who were desperate for medical attention that would relieve their gynecological problems. Kuhn also documents the continuance of these experimental surgeries on slave women by Sims' followers, including Nathan Bozeman, J.P. Mattauer, and Mortiz Schuppert. Slave cadavers were also used to enhance programs of study in schools in the North, while McGregor notes that "In the South, medical schools were dependant upon the availability of these subjects to entice medical students to enroll" (54). Although there is no direct evidence that the practice of clitoridectomy as performed in Africa prior to bondage in North America was continued by slaves, many modern day examples of African women in other countries (including Canada and Europe), who have continued the practice in the face of great social and political pressure to discontinue the ritual, (New York Times, January 17, 1993) one could deduct from this evidence that slave women probably continued this custom while in captivity. Although I could locate no documented evidence that experimental clitoridectomies were performed on slave women, it is interesting to note that although there was a tremendous cry of rage in European communities because of the clitoridectomies performed by Dr. Isaac Baker Brown on Caucasian women, doctors in the United States were able to continue experimental operations on slave bodies in the name of scientific advancement without any moral outcry (79). Hence, they could have, and did (McGregor) continue to use and

abuse the bodies, minds, and spirits of these women who were no more to them than human chattel.

CHINESE FOOTBINDING

As "foreign" as the rite of clitorizing women is to the Western observer, other practices have occurred in diverse communities which could be compared to the female circumcision. One of the most unusual of these rites is Chinese footbinding. The author of one particularly interesting and developed study of this tradition, Howard S. Levy, notes that the tradition probably began with the T'ang dynasty and, by the 12th century, it was "widely practiced in the palace". He writes:

> From then on, its impact as a hallmark of gentility and correct fashion was felt increasingly by the upper class. It also helped to ensure that a woman remain in her proper place--at home. It was so inconvenient for the bound-footed to get about that her chances for indulging sexually as did the Chinese male were greatly lessened. Footbinding proved to be a significant and lasting development in a nation whose outlook on feminine morality became increasingly stringent...That the tiny foot came to be considered a mark of gentility was equally significant. From the Yuan dynasty onward, families which claimed aristocratic lineage came to feel compelled to bind the feet of their girls, with utmost severity and diligence, as a visible sign of upper-class distinction. (46)

Thus, the female feet are bound in the name of "gentility" and sexual purity, and this practice also became a sign of an "upper-class" lineage. Much like the female circumcision,

footbinding also became such a part of the Chinese (and Oriental, as this was also practiced in Taiwan and Japan) tradition that it continued without question until the influence of the West and Christianity began to impact the culture (Levy). Again, comparable to female circumcision, Levy notes from his research that opposition to footbinding came from Christian missionary community:

> The natural-footed movement in the eighteen-nineties was identified with liberal reformers and champions of women's rights. By the early twentieth century, powerful officials and influential statesmen were giving it increasingly open support. A major factor in bringing the evils of footbinding before a large audience was the missionary community, which worked devotedly for this cause and gradually influenced public opinion against it. (85)

According to Levy, by 1938 most of the practice of footbinding had been eradicated from China and the provinces (Japan and Taiwan). Before it ended, however, it was believed (and probably was realistic because of the pain and deformation that occurred due to foot-binding) that the women who were bound-footed were not only more subject, but also more graceful and beautiful (one may question the beauty of the bound foot). Like clitoridectomies, footbinding was performed on young girls; also similar to clitorized women, doctors have noted that foot-bound women suffered many ailments, including irregular and difficult menstrual cycles which could be attributed to the "constricting of veins and slowing

circulation." These women experienced other physical problems including "constipation, dizziness, and vomiting, " yet men still insisted that their women were more sensuous, more attractive, and more poised than "natural-footed" or "large-footed women."

BRIDE BURNING

Another unusual practice is unlike Chinese Footbinding and some instances of female circumcision because it is viewed as a punitive measure, but it is also similar in many ways because the female body is still viewed as a commodity to be bought, sold, bound, burned, or cut. This most recent and controversial phenomena in the Hindu world is the practice of burning a bride because a husband's family is not satisfied with the amount of the dowry (the property a woman brings with her when she is married). This custom is related to the older custom, called sati, which Wanda Teays describes in an article entitled "The Burning Bride: The Dowry Problem in India." Teays writes that "sati" is viewed as

> the ultimate gift to her husband (in which) the ideal wife goes up in smoke in her husband's funeral pyre, (which is seen as) a sacrifice of religious honor and communal satisfaction; in dowry burnings, (to the contrary) the bride is set ablaze by her husband's family, a figure of dishonor, sacrificed out of consumer dissatisfaction. (29)

Teays states that because of the increasing demands for more goods and money at the time of marriage, many families are forced to take out loans to make certain that their daughter's

have an appropriate dowry. But those unable to keep up with this "modern" status quo find their daughters set on fire, often by the mother-in-law's (Detroit Free Press, June, 1993). Teays believes that it is the "modern" attitude of viewing marriage as a financial transaction which may bring one "upward mobility" that has led to the trend of bride burnings, which were once called "suicides." The statistics are varied, but Teays does note evidence which estimates that at least twenty-two deaths per day in India are the result of bride burnings. This issue, as Teays notes, is tied to concerns about the position of women in society and their place as the "property" of their husbands and/or fathers, and the way in which the Hindu religion impacts upon the lives of its' women. She writes that "Hindu women's lives revolve around men. Their fathers exert great power over them as young children and 'give' them to their husbands around puberty" (35). Woman's body and soul continues to be an object of manipulation in some form and for some purpose in these instances.

"NONMAINSTREAM BODY MODIFICATION"

Even though these rites of passage and/or methods of punishment may be difficult for many Westerners to understand, one recent study of what James Myers refers to as "Nonmainstream Body Modification," notes that people living in present-day North America for reasons sexual, psychological, and even masochistic, undergo rituals of genital piercing,

cutting, branding, and burning for "aesthetic" and other reasons. Myers writes,

> Sexual enhancement proved to be one of the most compelling reasons behind people's desire to alter their bodies. Even though sexual enhancement is presented here as a discrete motive, it cut across and joined with all eight categories. Thus whatever the motivational category, there was typically a sexual interest lurking behind the individuals' decisions to alter their bodies. (288)

From this small section of the study, one finds a striking fact--similar to female circumcision and footbinding, one of the main interests in this "body modification" is the supposed increase in "sexual desire" or performance when a decision is made to "alter" or mutilate a body. Although the author of this work does not claim that forced circumcisions or footbinding is in any way similar to a "modern" persons' need to disfigure self, it is interesting that many people, educated and otherwise, (Myers) continue to practice "rites of passage" in order to "prove" something to themselves or others in the societies in which they are a social part. Myers continues,

> Potential nonmainstream body modifiers frequently decide to alter their bodies because of a desire to identify themselves with a group of people they have deemed significantly important...Through the acquisition of a genital piercing or a brand for instance, individuals obtain a badge of admission--a visible record that affiliates them with others of similar interests and beliefs. (288)

Notably, many African women surveyed by El Dareer have stated similar reason for the continuation of the ritual because they believe that they will only be able to find themselves in the company of the ancestors after they are circumcised. They, too feel compelled to "prove" something to others--mainly that they are "real" women, willing to suffer the pain associated with the ritual. In a society that puts such a major emphasis on tradition, it is understandable that these African and Muslim women feel compelled to submit to the operations.

One may also compare these operations to women's desire to be beautiful in a society which defines beauty based on the contours or shape and size of one's body. In a society like the United States, women undergo various operations, including liposuction and breast implantation, in order to conform to societies standards of beauty. The New England Journal of Medicine notes that breast implants have been linked to breast cancer (June, 1992), yet women continue to have these operations. It is also interesting to note that college students in fraternities, particularly on historically Black college campuses, as late as the 1980's have participated in "branding" rituals to show their loyalty and love of their organizations, while some members of sororities now wear tattoos for the same reason. (This information comes from personal experience as I attended an historically Black college from 1982-1990, and I witnessed this instances of "proven" loyalty).

PSYCHOLOGICAL RAMIFICATIONS

I now return to the query presented at the outset of this study: why clitorize women? One author, Bruno Bettelheim, notes that the "female circumcision may be partly the result of men's ambivalence about female sex functions and partly a reaction to male circumcision (119)." He further suggests that although he found one particularly interesting paper on the subject written by M. Bonaparte, which stated that "man's fear and dislike of the clitoris and his desire to force vaginal sexuality on the woman in preference to clitoridean sexuality" caused clitoridectomies, it is his belief that these operations are performed due to "man's envy of woman's procreative function, and his desire to acquire power of the vagina and the dangerous menstrual blood" (my emphasis, 120). There are several examples of the "dangerousness" of menstrual blood not only in African literature, but also in the Bible, which refers to a menstruating woman as "unclean". In Leviticus 15:17, the author writes:

> And if a woman have an issue, and her issue in her flesh be blood, she shall be put apart seven days: and whoever toucheth her shall be unclean until the even.

As this passage continues, it notes further that all the things this "unclean" woman sleeps on or sits on, also becomes unclean and must be thoroughly washed, and that if any man touches or sleeps with this woman while she is "unclean" he, too, is unclean and must also be thoroughly cleansed. One

could argue that these "laws" were instituted before the modern era of easy, accessible, and clean feminine hygiene, but there are still those who believe, even in the Christian world, that a menstruating woman is an unclean being. For example, a colleague noted attending services one Sunday morning and hearing his Bishop defend the Church position on preventing women from attaining the position of Bishop in the Apostolic Church, he not only noted that there was a Biblical injunction against it (Titus 1:6-7), but more importantly for this study, he stated that women are "unclean" one part of the month and, thus, they would be unable to hold that position and serve the congregation while in that "unclean" state (Hopkins). Similarly, a recent letter from the "Women's Ordination Conference" of the Catholic Church presents a call to those who would like to voice their opinions on the ordination of women as bishops and priests in the church because, as Ruth McDonough Fitzpatrick writes, "Pope John Paul II has no plans to ordain women when he visits Denver in August" (June 1993). Thus, women are still faced with what she refers to as the "stained glass ceiling" in various religious communities.

Further, Buchi Emecheta notes in one of her novels that a menstruating woman cannot enter the hut of a man for fear she will "pollute" him, nor can she bathe in the stream for the same reason (<u>The Bride Price</u>). In her essay, "Ghana: To

Be A Woman," Ama Ata Aidoo gives similar accounts of this belief:

> I had sensed as a child living among adult females that everything which had to do exclusively with being a woman was regarded as dirty. At definite 'traditional' landmarks in a woman's life cycle, she was regarded as literally untouchable...These landmarks included the first menstruation and (for some) all other menstruations;...A girl's first menstrual flow was celebrated after a whole week of confinement. (258)

Also, when women are "barren" or unable to conceive, they are seen as the culprits of this affront to their husbands. It is never the husband who is unable to produce--it is always the woman who must present her body as a sacrifice to the goddess of the river (or to the medicine men or women, or even her "Chi" or personal 'god') to regain or recharge her fertility. This is evident in the writings of not only Emecheta, but there is also in an example of this in Chinua Achebe's novel Things Fall Apart, and other African authors like Nwapa. And if it is woman who holds the "key" to reproduction, one could conclude that the male might envy this power and, thus, control it by his only means--cutting off and sewing up the woman to maintain authority over her sexuality and her child bearing ability.

Furthermore, Williams-Moen states that she believes that genital mutilation is "done everywhere for the same reason: sexual politics, the control of females in order to control fertility" (11). She continues:

> I have developed the argument that the main reason societies dominate women is that birth rates are vitally important to every level of human social organizations--from the global to the family, and further that there is enormous power inherent in the control of fertility. When only the aggregate birth rate is important, women are allowed flexibility in their sexual and reproductive behavior. But in a highly patriarchal society where maintenance of the blood line and/or property through legitimate children is extremely important...then it is necessary to control the sexual and reproductive behavior of <u>each</u> woman. (Her emphasis, 11)

Thus, as earlier noted, the reproductive ability of woman must be controlled, and woman's body must be mutilated, so that the patriarchy may remain intact.

CAMPAIGNS TO END FEMALE CIRCUMCISION

There are presently several movements to "eradicate" female circumcision in the African and Muslim worlds (and abroad). Notably, all the studies I have noted, except for the Kenyatta work, have a section calling for the "eradication" or "abolition" of circumcision. Women like Nawal El Sadaawi and Awa Thiam are calling on African women to join the fight against the oppression of women in their respective countries, Egypt and Senegal, and all over Black Africa. In her work, <u>Speak Out, Black Sisters</u>, Thiam bids her "Black sisters" to join her and denounce the general oppression, as well as the circumcision, of female bodies:

> Every woman is, or ought to be, concerned about sexual mutilation practised on the

> body of another, whoever she may be. But it remains for excised and infibulated women themselves, being opposed to these practices and aware of their harmful consequences, to say publicly that they want an end to these ancestral customs; and to translate their word into action in their daily lives. (85)

Thiam emphasizes here that although it is important that other women throughout the world call for eradication of this practice, it will only be when the voices of circumcised women are heard that the nations and world communities will be able to assemble together and eliminate the ritual. She also notes the experience of one African woman, a 29 year old married woman with a Bachelor of Arts Degree, who was not aware of her infibulation and excision until she was about to be married, who does allow her outraged voice to be heard:

> I have no memory of being excised or infibulated as the operation was performed when I was very young. I only became aware of my condition when I was 20 and about to be married...As soon as I was conscious of being excised and infibulated, I felt a deep sense of outrage. What was I to do, I wondered. I had no intention of letting myself be cut open with a knife on my wedding day, as is the custom for all women who have been both excised and infibulated...Day by day I grew angrier and more rebellious. I saw how strong social pressure could be... Finally, on the evening of my wedding I had to make the best of a bad job and let myself be cut open. (64-65)

This was the experience of many women interviewed by Thiam, women like Sadaawi and others, who did not even understand or realize that their rights and their bodies had been operated

on, (partially because they were very small children) without their knowledge or consent, and most likely at the urging or insistence of their mothers. But it is not merely enough for these women to say that the circumcision of women is "cruel" and "medically dangerous" for women and the children they will bear. What Saadawi and Thiam note as most important in the struggle to end female circumcision is the re-education and re-interpretation of womanhood for the women (and men) who have been socialized to believe that only women who have undergone this ritual are "real" women. It is apparent in the literature on the subject that many women are opposed to the eradication of this ritual, as I have earlier indicated, for various reasons. Thiam writes of one women's experience and commentary on her own circumcision:

> I was excised as a child. I'm talking about my own personal experience. Today, I'm glad I had the excision operation. The reason why I maintain this point of view is that it has fulfilled its function as far as I'm concerned. I've been divorced for four years and I've never for one moment felt the desire to run after a man...it allows a woman to be in control of her own body. (66)

This woman felt that her operation gave her a control over herself and her body that women who are not circumcised do not have. In her work, Sanderson writes that people who are taught to believe something, whatever the consequences, will continue in that vein. She notes:

> People's beliefs must be challenged and the implications of change by society at large, accepted. As a Ugandan father explained, if a boy believes that his right hand must be cut off before he can enter adult society then he will willingly submit to the mutilation in order to be accepted by his group (4) If people believe that genital mutilation is essential to full womanhood, they may accept it whatever the medical hazards. (112)

Thus, one cannot simply present documented evidence of difficult penetration, high infant mortality, and high death rates from "botched" or "unsterile" operations and think that will be sufficient in the call to end the practice. Saadawi, Sanderson, and Thiam maintain that until women and men are re-socialized to understand that an intact clitoris will not ultimately lead to promiscuity, and that the intact vagina does not mean that a woman <u>is not</u> a woman, the ritual will continue. And until the social structures that would exclude uncircumcised women must be dramatically altered.

There are presently several organizations, including the World Health Organization, that are working to terminate circumcision all over the world (El Dareer, 96). These associations are working to ensure that the women in the various noted studies, and their daughters, will not feel inclined to continue these practices. But until then, fictional women like Walker's Tashi, Ngugi's Muthoni, and Nwapa's Efuru present readers with a glimpse into the societies, and the minds, bodies, and souls of women who are dedicated, and often destroyed by societal traditions. Only

the voices of circumcised and infibulated women and other alliances for the "eradication" of the practice will end this tradition.

CHAPTER TWO
READING EFURU AS A WOMAN: ESACPE FROM A WORLD OF MOTHERHOOD AND MARRIAGE TO THE SPIRITUAL SISTERHOOD OF UHAMIRI

> Until recently, reading was thought to be a rather straightforward procedure. Whether one emphasized its cognitive aspects... or its affective aspects.. the goal was to respond properly to the stimulus provided by the text, that is, to an object that remained the same at all times and for everyone... However, in spite of the impressive institutions designed to preserve this view of reading, it was in constant peril, especially in the field of literary studies. Readers were continually producing counterexamples in the form of irreducibly different and often contradictory readings of the same text... Today, the "objectivist" model of reading is still powerful, but during the last two decades, new "stories of reading" have begun to take root in the field of literary criticism. (ix, Gender and Reading, Essays on Readers, Texts, and Contexts, Flynn and Schweickart, eds.)

One of the most significant new "stories of reading" that has come out of this "peril" described by Elizabeth A. Flynn and Patricinio P. Schweickart is a "feminist" reading. A "feminist" reading refers to a manner of reading that incorporates the ideas and ideologies associated with gender differences in approaches to literature, life, etc... Several authors have discusses some of these new "feminist" theories of reading, and some interesting conclusions have been made. One question of particular interest presently addresses the issue of what it really means to "read as a woman." Another important query is this: can a woman "read as a woman" after being educated to read "like a man?" In his work, On

Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism, Jonathan Culler discusses these questions and forms several interesting conclusions.

What does it mean to 'read as a woman'? Culler's answer is brief and somewhat problematic. He writes, "to read as a woman is to avoid reading as a man, to identify the specific defenses and distortions of male misreadings and provide correctives" (OD, 54). Though Culler fails to outline these "specific defenses and distortions," he does provide some basic guidelines for one who is interested in the idea of the constructed female reader.

However, others like Schweickart, Flynn, and Judith Fetterley articulate much more concretely examples of this reading process. Accordingly, to 'read as a woman' requires that one come to the work with the intent not to read as a man, and therefore, not allow oneself to view as important the ideas and ideologies that are usually associated with a view of life presented by males in power. One novel which tells woman's story from a "woman's" standpoint, and which has not really, in my opinion, been read from a "feminist" lens, is Flora Nwapa's Efuru.

In 1966, Flora Nwapa published her first novel. Gay Wilentz notes in her work, Binding Cultures, that the work, Efuru, was to be the first novel published in English by a Black African woman. She continues:

> With the publication of Efuru, Flora Nwapa brought a fresh perspective to

> traditional West African culture and modern Nigeria in literary works by exploring a woman's point of view and exposing a society close to its precolonial roots... Nwapa tells us that she "writes stories about women because these stories are familiar to her..." (3)

Until the publication of Efuru, West African literature was dominated by male writers such as Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka. Now a woman's voice would be heard.

Efuru is the story of a young Igbo woman who, unable to flourish in the "traditional" Igbo world of marriage and motherhood, turns to the river goddess Uhamiri in order to find physical, spiritual, and psychological solace. The title character, Efuru, is a woman living in a society which attempts to dictate almost every aspect of her life: from the man she will marry and the children she will bear, to the control she will have over her own body, to her position in society and the community. Here is a community of customs: of ancient, unquestioned traditions. A woman must marry in a certain manner; a woman must mourn in a certain manner; a woman must submit herself, willingly and fully, to the laws and the rituals of the community. Male and female roles are strictly defined; any deviation from those defined roles (for men or women) can mean total ostracism from the community.

One of the most important traditions in the community is that of the "bath," or clitoridectomy. It is the belief that a woman must undergo this operation before she gives birth to a baby because, as the novel suggests, any child who is born

to a woman with an intact clitoris will become "unclean," and the child's chances for survival will be limited. Nwapa seemingly presents the simple story of the hardships and triumphs of the title protagonist; however, upon a closer reading, and a reading with the constructed "female" reader, one will find a much more complex text. There is the underlying tone that "all is not right" with Efuru's world, especially after she undergoes her "bath." In order to understand the complexity of Efuru, one must consider several important questions.

First of all, what is the significance of female circumcision (the bath) in this novel? Why is it difficult for Efuru to conceive after her "bath"? What is the purpose of this "bath" and the implication of the use of the word "bath" to denote circumcision? Does the operation change Efuru's mental or psychological self, and if so, how? Why does she "willingly" choose to worship the river goddess, Uhamiri, if she knows that the women who worship her are usually the ones who find monetary success, but not marital happiness, neither do they seem to experience the "joy of motherhood"? Do Efuru and other women like her find their 'joy' by escaping the traditional societal roles dictated not only by the patriarchy, but also by the fiercely strong community of older women who become the ultimate keepers of the status quo due to their earned positions of authority within their respective communities? Under the constructed

guise of woman reading as "woman," I will attempt to analyze the events of Efuru's life which lead her to the eventual worship of the river goddess Uhamiri as an alternative to the roles of wife and mother, the traditional roles for women in her culture, and the effect of the "bath" on her spiritual, physical, and psychological self.

In the essay entitled, "Reading Ourselves: Toward a Feminist Theory of Reading," Patricinio P. Schweickart discusses some of the important questions that are now facing women as readers, writers, and critics attempting to "read" woman's experience as "woman," (and a term coined by Elaine Showalter, "gynocritics"):

> Today, the dominant mode of feminist criticism is "gynocritics," the study of woman as writer, of the "history, styles, themes, genres, and structures of writing by women; the psychodynamics of female creativity; the trajectory of the individual or collective female career; and the evolution and laws of a female literary tradition." This shift from "feminist critique" to "gynocritics"--from emphasis on woman as reader to woman as writer--has put us in the position of developing a feminist criticism that is "genuinely woman-centered, independent, and intellectually coherent."... But why should the activity of the woman writer be more conducive to theory than the activity of the woman reader is? If it is possible to formulate a basic conceptual framework for disclosing the "difference" of women's writing, surely it is no less possible to do so for women's reading. The same difference, be it linguistic, biological, psychological, or cultural, should apply in either case. In addition, what Showalter call "gynocritics" is in fact constituted by feminist criticism--that is, readings--of

> female texts. Thus, the relevant distinction is not between woman as reader and woman as writer, but between feminist readings of male texts and feminist readings of female texts, and there is no reason why the former could not be as theoretically coherent (or irreducibly pluralistic) as the latter. (38)

Although this paper will not discuss this "new" term by Showalter (gynocritics), it is important that Schweickart notes here that just as Showalter has pointed out the differences in the writing of women and men, so exists similar differences between the reading of women and men. It is this difference in reading (as I earlier note from Culler) as a 'woman' that will be used to investigate the life of the character Efuru as woman. I will also explore some male readings of the novel, including Lloyd Brown's, and question the assumptions of that and other readings of Efuru's text as a woman reader reading a woman's text. Schweickart continues:

> Feminist criticism, we should remember, is a mode of **praxis**. The point is not merely to interpret literature in various ways; the point is to **change the world**... Two factors--gender and politics--which are suppressed in the dominant models of reading gain prominence with the advent of a feminist perspective. The feminist story will have at least two chapters: one concerned with feminists readings of male texts, and another with feminist readings of female texts. In addition, in this story, gender will have a prominent role as the locus of political struggle. The story will speak of the difference between men and women, of the way the experience and perspectives of women have been systematically fallaciously assimilated into the generic

> masculine, and of the need to correct this error. (39)

Efuru is a work that speaks to the reader of the personal experience of woman in a male-dominated world, and how that experience has an impact on the women who must live in that world. I will discuss some of these events, how they alter the life of the main character Efuru, and how some authors, both male and female, have approached this text from a "generically masculine" vantage point, which has, it seems to me, obscured one of the most important events in the characters' life.

One of the most critical events of Efuru's life takes place in the first few pages of the novel--the "bath" or circumcision. There is a definitive change in the continuity of relationships between Efuru as woman and her experience within the "social and familial structures" after her circumcision. This event has been given little or no critical attention discussions on the novel by male writers such as Ernest Emenyou and Lloyd Brown, and even female writers like Carole Boyce Davies and Maryse Conde. However, it is the assertion of this critic, "reading as a woman," that this circumcision is the pivotal event of Efuru's young adult life that will dramatically alter the remainder of her existence, and this discussion will attempt to give adequate attention to this issue.

It is important to note that the novel begins with a strong, defiant young woman who decides to "choose" her own husband. Efuru is the "prized" daughter of her father. Her

mother, who had experienced an untimely death, was the "favorite wife" of the honored village elder, Nwashike Ogene. Thus, Efuru holds a special place in her father's heart. But Efuru runs away from the safety and security of her father's home, and the ultimate possibility of an arranged marriage, against her father's wishes and without the customary procedures of negotiating and paying the dowry (bride price) before the marriage. Efuru has been secretly meeting with her lover, Adizua, and they have decided that they will marry. Nwapa writes:

> On Nkwo day when everybody had gone to the market, Efuru prepared herself. She had her bath very early in the stream. She took great care that morning over her appearance. Her father was not at home. She took a few of her belongings and went to her lover's house. The mother of the young man went to the market; when she returned she was surprised to see Efuru's clothes and a few other possessions in her son's room. The young man was quick to explain. He told his mother that Efuru was his wife. 'I have no money for the dowry yet. Efuru herself understands this. We have agreed to be husband and wife and that is all that matters.' (8)

This action brings an immediate response from Efuru's father and family, who encourage her to make certain that her husband proceeds with the proper marriage procedures; namely, that the exchange of gifts and the dowry is paid as soon as possible. Efuru understands that until that time, neither her family nor the community as a whole will officially recognize her marriage.

The concern of her father and her family, however, is not just for the welfare or the well-being of the newly married couple; instead, (and more importantly), it is about how her actions will be perceived by the community, especially the community of enemies of the village. It is the families' (and community's) assertion that Efuru should have considered the societal repercussions of her actions before participating in this marriage. The communities' response was brief and pointed:

> Efuru has run away to a young man. It is a shame. Our enemies will glory in this. This young man is nobody. His family is not known. Efuru has brought shame on us. Something must be done immediately to get her back. (8-9)

Reading this section as a woman reading woman's experience, it is important to note that it is the village elders and the men in Efuru's family who expect her immediate return home, and who insist that she and her husband abide by the rules of the patriarchy by presenting an acceptable dowry in exchange for the bride. The perception of one's community and the sustenance of the male power structure are the central foci--Efuru has brought shame, not on herself, but on her family and her village.

The nexus of woman and the concept of shame is not a new one. In the earliest Hebrew texts translated in English, the female body and functions are referred to as "dirty and unclean" (see Leviticus in the King James Bible). Some Muslim women are taught that the Koran tells them that they must hide

their "shameful parts" (See Nawal El Sadaawi), and some African women have discussed in their literature and essays the "shame" associated with being a woman (see Buchi Emecheta and Ama Ata Aidoo). But reading this passage "as a woman," one must note that Efuru is not attempting to "bring shame" on herself or her community; instead, she is asserting an independence of character that might have been considered admirable, if she were living in a society which respected and perpetuated the image of the strong-willed, independent, female figure. It is not that Efuru acts **against** anyone or anything; nor is hers an effort to dishonor her community. She, instead, acts mainly as one in love and determined to be with the man of her choice. As Maryse Conde notes in the essay, "Three Female Writers in Modern Africa: Flora Nwapa, Ama Ata Aidoo, and Grace Ogot:"

> Efuru is portrayed as a very independent character. Unconcerned with her parents opinions, she chooses her own husband, a young man who has not even enough money for her dowry, and runs away to live with him...Having married the man of her choice, Efuru does not stop there and is no picture of meek obedience. (134-35)

Although she is not the picture of "meek obedience," it is important to Efuru that her husband pay the expected dowry. She is, at this point, unable to break totally with tradition. She realizes that if the dowry is not paid, her husband will be despised by her family and community.

It is quite apparent that the exchange of a daughter to the position of wife/bride is, in this case, a monetary

transaction. It is Efuru's choice to adhere to the familial and societal tradition of the payment of a dowry. And it is not until the dowry is paid that Efuru is able to find true solace in her marriage. Nwapa writes:

> ...the dowry was fixed and Adizua's people paid everything there. They drank and when the ceremony came to an end, Efuru's father called her and her husband and blessed them and gave them some words of advice. They went home and for the first time since that fateful day the two felt really married. (24)

Thus, even though Efuru is 'bold' enough to run away from her father to marry the man of her choice, it is not until the traditions are upheld that even the couple feel that they are "really married." A financial transaction must take place; thus, Efuru remains her father's "property" until the exchange of money and gifts takes place. Lynda E. Boose describes this tradition as it is practiced in many parts of the African, Muslim, and Asian worlds:

> In the anthropological narration of family, the father is the figure who controls the exogamous exchange of women. The woman most practically available to be exchanged is clearly not the mother, who sexually belongs to the father, nor the sister, she comes under the bestowed rights of her own father. The exchangeable figure is the daughter (19).

Continuing Boose notes that "In Levi-Strauss's terms, the exchange of women between males constitutes the 'supreme rule of the gift'" (25). Thus, as the "exchangeable" gift, Efuru must be properly transferred or Adizua will violate the male understanding of the transaction and the "gift" by taking

Efuru as his wife before he is financially able to "pay" for her. This action will upset the frame of the patriarchy because the woman as "exchangeable gift" has been taken without the proper financial interchange. Hence, until the dowry is paid, and the proper ceremonies take place, Efuru and her husband will remain on the periphery of her once close-knit, loving family, headed by her dedicated and loving father.

Efuru has decided that she will suffer the wrath of her father and remain, at least initially, ostracized from her immediate family in order to be with the man of her choice. But although she is willing to live with her father's anger for a length of time, she finds it difficult to detach completely from her communities' traditions. This is one of the major problems of women asserting themselves in a male world, and also a problem for a constructed female reader, recognizing the conflicts and contradictions inherent within a reading that is "female." Schweickart continues:

> Judith Fetterely gives the most explicit theory to date about the dynamics of the woman reader's encounter with androcentric literature. According to Fetterely, notwithstanding the prevalence of the castrating bitch stereotype, "the cultural reality is not the emasculation of men by women, but the emasculation of women by men. As readers and teachers and scholars, women are taught to think as men, to identify with a male point of view, and to accept as normal and legitimate a male system of values, one of whose central principles in misogyny." (41-42)

Schweickart assertions are critical: women have been taught to view the world through the eyes of men: it is a world view where women's ideas, needs, and concerns are secondary or unimportant, and in which the thinking, feeling, acting world is male, and all who live in the world must respond to the needs of the male as center. This reading of the world is a "learned" one, and one of the main foci of that learning experience for women is self-hate. Because many women have been taught in school, at home, and society in general to experience the world from a male perspective, that is, to put their needs second or often away in order to please others, (usually male) it is understandable that though Efuru flouts convention on one level, she adheres to it on another. Her vantage point remains in the realm of the ideology of the "dominant" power.

Katherine Frank articulately notes this conflict, particularly in reference to the African woman in her essay, "Feminist Criticism and the African Novel:

> The fundamental problem that seems to face the contemporary African fictional heroine is that she is torn between two antagonistic identities: her communally -bred sense of herself as an African, and her feminist aspirations for autonomy and self-realizations as a woman. Feminism, by definition, is a profoundly individualistic philosophy: it values the personal growth and individual fulfillment over any larger communal needs or good. African society, of course, even in its most westernized, modern forms, places the value of the group over those of the individual with the result that the notion of an African

> feminist almost seems a contradiction in terms. (45)

The character of Efuru is an embodiment of contradictions. It is difficult for her to break with many of her community's traditions and rituals. But it is not merely because she is an African woman; more importantly, it is because she is like many women who have been socialized to view the needs of the men in their societies before their own personal desires. For example, Efuru waits almost two years for her husband to return after he abandons her. She remains faithful to him, even though all the evidence suggests that he has not been loyal to her. She is not expected to find another husband right away, but it is required that she wait for her husband to return. After Efuru finds out that her husband is having an affair, this is the advice that she receives from Ajanupu, her husband's aunt and her confidant:

> My advice is this my dear child: be patient and wait. It is only the patient man that drinks good water. Some men are not fit to be called men. They have no sense. They are like dogs that do not know who feeds them. Leave Adizua with this woman. He will soon be tired of her and you will resume your position again. This is all I have come to tell you. (58)

Thus, it is up to the woman to "wait" and be patient, and hope that her man will return. Although Efuru knows she has been betrayed, she takes the advice of her "aunt" and remains with her mother-in-law for two years in the belief that Adizua will return to her. But her faithfulness is never reciprocated.

As the novel continues, Efuru's responses and reactions become even more ambiguous and paradoxical.

The idea of Efuru as contradictory character is also discussed in Naana Banyiwa-Horne's essay, "African Womanhood: The Contrasting Perspectives of Flora Nwapa's Efuru and Elechi Amadi's The Concubine". She writes:

> Nwapa's Efuru is no paragon of female submissiveness. She demonstrates a marked sense of independence and a determination to lead a fulfilling life. From an early age she reveals a resolve to control her own life rather than submit blindly to tradition. She is by no means a revolutionary because she does not completely abrogate tradition, but neither is she enslaved by it. Whenever traditional stipulations stifle her individuality, she steps out of them to adopt alternative means that best enable her to express her personality. (125)

Efuru does, in many instances, exercise a sense of independence and determination in her actions before, during and after both of her marriages. But I agree with Banyiwa-Horne's assertion that she does not "completely abrogate tradition," most notably in her participation in the "bath," and also in her initial desire to become the mother and wife society has deemed she must be in order to be happy and fulfilled. As Barbara Christian notes

> Motherhood is a major theme in contemporary women's literature, the "unwritten story" just beginning to be told as a result of women's struggles to become all that they can be...As important is the fact that the role of mother, with all that it implies, is universally imposed upon women as their sole identity, their proper identity,

> above all others. The primacy of motherhood for women is the one value that societies, whatever their differences, share. (Black Feminist Criticism, 212)

Thus, Christian believes that women in societies all over the world, even in the industrialized United States and the Western world, feel some pressure to become wives and/or mothers. In the work, Ties That Bind: Essays on Mothering and Patriarchy, notes via the editors that "motherhood is arguably the most profound life transit a woman undertakes, the deepest knowledge she can experience" (1) They proceed by stating that motherhood is an extremely intimate experience and that it changes perpetually social and private life. "From her earliest years, she has been the recipient of a continuous stream of dictates, determinations, representations, and norms of femininity--a condition exemplified by heterosexual marriage and motherhood" (1). Thus, Efuru feels it is her destiny in life to live as a wife and a mother; and, within her culture, a wife and a mother must first be circumcised.

Although she decides to adhere to the precepts of her cultural tradition, Efuru is not the initiator of the "bath." Instead, it is her mother-in-law who insists that the ceremony take place as soon as possible:

> One day, Efuru's mother-in-law called her. 'My daughter,' she said to her. 'You have not had your bath.' 'No, my mother, I have not had my bath.' 'A young woman must have her bath before she has a baby.' 'I am not pregnant yet, mother.' 'I know, my daughter. I am not talking about that... I want you to have your

> bath before there is a baby. It is better that way. It is safer really.' (11)

The discussion and arrangement for clitorization (and other female rituals/expectations) are initiated and necessitated by the mother-in-law and/or other matriarchs, generally in the male spouse's family. This instance of the mother-in-law (or female matriarch) as initiator of ritual and keeper of tradition is a phenomenon throughout many Arab, African, and Muslim societies. For example, the June 13, 1993 issue of the Detroit Free Press notes that not only are the mothers'-in-law often the initiators of clitoridectomies, but they sometimes take an active part in the ceremony, removing the clitoris themselves. The Detroit Free Press tells the story of a young woman, Agnes Manyara, who grew up in a family which did not have their daughters circumcised. After her marriage, her husband's family became "displeased" with her because she obtained a part-time job outside the home. The author continues: "Two years ago, while her husband was away, her mother-in-law and several other female-in-laws attacked. She was held down on her living room floor and circumcised." This case does seem to be the representation of an extreme scenario in which older women feel they must control younger women by forcing them to submit to rituals. However, the mother-in-law and older women seem to remain powerful figures in many cultures, with the right to demand certain things from their future daughters-in-law and their own children. Evelyne

Acaad also talks about the power of the mother-in-law in the Arab world and her ability to "inspect" the "merchandise" who will become her daughters'-in-law:

> Once the transaction has been completed, the mother of the groom generally wants to inspect the "merchandise," so she usually invites the bride, together with the bride's mother, to the hammam (public bath)...On the marriage night the relatives usually gather outside the nuptial chamber and, after the consummation, the mother-in-law (and sometimes others as well) troops in to view the sheet or handkerchief stained with the hymenal blood (or its substitute). ("The Social Position of Women in North African and the Arab World," 26)

Although Efuru's mother-in-law does not stand outside the nuptial chamber for virginal confirmation, or does she physically hold Efuru down during her circumcision, she does insist that Efuru remain true to her culture and her womanhood by having the procedure. Other instances of family matriarchs having circumcisions performed on their children, grandchildren, etc... without the knowledge or even consent of the parents/participants can be found in the works of Hanny Lightfoot Klein and Nawal El Sadaawi, and Elizabeth Moen.[1]

Although the women represented in Acaad's work are from different cultures, one "Arabian," one "African," they share

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[1] Other instances of family matriarchs having circumcision performed on their children and/or grandchildren, etc. without the consent or even knowledge of the parents/participants may be found in the works of Nawal El Sadaawi, Hanny Lightfoot-Klein, and Elizabeth Moen. See Works Cited in "Introduction" for bibliographic information.

experiences which bind them together. First of all, the issue of the power and the influence of older women in their respective societies is prevalent. The women her are both acting, and being acted upon. They are participating in the rituals, and they are making certain that the women in the younger generations remain true to their heritage. Efuru's mother-in-law has 'power' over her body--she demands that "it" be circumcised--while the women in Acaad's analysis are similar in their right to demand certain things from their daughters-in-law--such as public bodily displays and inspections, or hymenal confirmation, to name a few. One of the other, and most important similarities, is that these older women become "active participants" in the rituals and traditions that seem to subjugate them; they themselves view the female body as 'sinful,' 'shameful,' and 'dirty.' This is a part of how woman has been taught to "read" the experience of woman. Schweickart writes:

> The process of immasculation does not impart virile power to the woman reader. On the contrary, it doubles her oppression. She suffers "not simply the powerlessness which derives from not seeing one's experience articulated, clarified, and legitimized in art, but more significantly, the powerlessness which results from the endless division of self against self, the consequence of the invocation to identify as male while being reminded that to be male--to be universal--...is to be not female." (42)

Woman's "powerlessness" then, is acquired by living in a world which focuses its attention on the needs and perceptions

of men. A woman must care for her son, and love and nurture and build up the egos of the son and the father,(and even the daughter), without concern for her own personal welfare. She must focus her attention on the stability of the household and the community, while her own needs must remain secondary or must be abandoned for the greater needs of those in power. The lives, minds, and spirits of women are also affected from within any society which perceives women's bodies, sexuality, and women's selves as negative. One must identify with the male perspective because that is the "universal" perspective. To identify with woman is to create, somehow, a limited world view.

The women in Efuru's world have basically prescribed to the this limited world view by assigning themselves to the roles available to them. But unlike the woman in the Detroit Free Press article and her family, who had been "educated" about the "dangers," and felt themselves "enlightened" to the school of thought that female circumcision was no longer a necessary operation, Efuru and other women in Nwapa's novel participate in circumcision as if it is merely one of the painful, but necessary, parts of the life of a woman. Lloyd Brown notes in his brief discussion of Efuru's circumcision that

> This series of ceremonies is centered on that body-consciousness which is so pervasive in Nwapa's fiction. Her women are extremely conscious of their bodies in relation to their roles as wives and mothers. Accordingly, most of the

> prescribed rites in which Efuru participates are as physically oriented as they are morally justified. Clitoridectomy, for example, is both physically "useful" (allegedly, to facilitate child birth) and a morally sanctioned compliance with established religious and social custom. The total effect of this pervasive and intense body-consciousness among the women is to encourage the acceptance of their roles as inevitable and necessary. (146)

Reading Brown's criticism here 'as a woman', it is important to note that Brown does not explore the "why" of the significance of the woman's body-consciousness as text in Nwapa's writing. In Nwapa's work, woman's body becomes text because it is an important commodity in the patriarchy--it is the only means (at least presently) of maintaining future generations of men. Gay Wilentz voices a similar sentiment in the following quotation from Binding Cultures:

> Revealingly, the voice of the community that demands adherence to strict social codes for its' women often comes from the women themselves. The paradox of this system, adding to the complexity of linguistical meaning in the novel, is that women often uphold traditions and practices which limit their choices and rights as women. (6)

Wilentz does not really address the issue of "why" women participate in their own subjugation; the idea is merely articulated within her work. She does go further than Brown. Wilentz states that the "language" of the older women is used to silence Efuru and the concerns of the pain associated with the operation; however, there needs to be a further investigation into the matter of "why".

It is important to note the absence of the discussion of woman's body as text, particularly in relation to the image of the clitoris and or the clitoridectomy, in many feminist readings of texts. It is noted in this work that it is not only Lloyd Brown who does not discuss the issue of Efuru's circumcision in great detail, but also the women who discuss the novel, including Wilentz and Carole Boyce-Davies, are not particularly sensitive to the issue. In her essay, "Critical Clitoridectomy: Female Sexual Imagery and Feminist Psychoanalytic Theory," Paul Bennett discusses the matter of the feminist critic and the avoidance of the clitoris in literary analysis as follows:

> If the clitoris can thus supply an alternative and autonomous site for definitions of female pleasure and desire, why then, one must wonder, has twentieth-century feminist psychoanalytic theory been so reluctant to discuss it? Why, that is, have so many theorists maintained a Freudian and Lacanian-authorized silence on this particular topic, a silence that neither female sexual symbolism nor the female sexual response in themselves supports? (128)

Bennett continues her essay with a detailed discussion of Freud's analysis and representation of the clitoris that, she feels, has much to do with the absence of its' discussion in feminist psychoanalytic theory. She writes:

> To understand why feminist psychoanalytic theory thus far has been unable to incorporate the clitoris into its thinking on female sexuality, the best place to begin is with Freud. And to understand Freud's general treatment of the clitoris, one must see it as part of

> the general anxiety he exhibits whenever confronting the female genitalia... (128)

Bennett asserts that Freudian theory has to "eliminate" the thing about the woman that made her "masculine" in order to view her as "feminine:" that thing is the clitoris. Notably here, Freud's views are not unlike the Dogon and the Bambara who also believed that the clitoris represented the masculine part of woman, and therefore, that it must be eliminated in order to delete that "duality" that exists in woman. Thus, it was not only the "ancient" Africans who believed in the "duality" of the sexes, and although Freud did not call for the literal removal of the clitoris, he did state, as Bennett notes, that "' the elimination of clitoridal sexuality is a necessary precondition for the development of femininity'" (129). Bennett notes further that

> For feminist psychoanalytic theory, the consequences of this Freudian blind spot have been as negative as Spivak suggests they must be whenever the "suppression or effacement of the clitoris" is involved...For it is only by rendering the clitoris accidental (as it were) to female sexuality (and this, effectively eliminating it) that complementarity is made possible. In the binary terms of Freud's phallocentric definition, without the clitoris, women are what men are not: as Cixous puts it, they are dark where men are light, passive where men are active, empty where men are full... Thus deprived of that which makes her different but "equal" to men, the Freudian woman becomes man's negative obverse... (130-31)

According to Bennett, Freud's analysis of the clitoris, and his "elimination" of clitoral imagery, has even affected the

way in which women as feminists discuss the clitoris. The clitoris is that thing which gives sexual pleasure to women, and it is that evolutionary part of woman that remains 'male'. Thus, only with the removal of clitoral imagery, and with the lack of discussion of the imagery, can man maintain his dominance in the phallocentric world that Freud describes as one which revolves around "penis envy." A woman with a clitoris does not have the need, then, to envy the penis because she has, in a sense, her own 'penis.' This idea is too deemasculating, and apparently difficult for even women as theorists because it questions the idea of male primacy and gender in general. This could be one of the main reasons why women themselves have refused or neglected to discuss the issues associated with clitoral imagery in their own analyses of literature. But it is not just important to note why women have neglected the discussion of the clitoris in their analyses; it is also important to note why the women in works which focus on the discussion of women and women's issues often participate in their own subjugation.

In the "Introduction" to this work, the section on "Women and Tradition" discusses the issue of "why" women are such staunch keepers of "status quo" in some detail, noting that it is usually the older women who maintain the traditions for the younger women (and the men in some cases). Reasons noted include lack of economic, social, or political power outside the realm of tradition, as well as the belief by many that

these and other rituals and conditions of life will be "good" for the young women because the older women have already participated in them. Acaad's analysis of this phenomenon in the Arab world is particularly enlightening:

> It should be mentioned that women at an advanced age who have fulfilled the expectations of society by providing male children and satisfying physically, psychologically and socially the harsh demands made upon them, acquire an immense power within the family structure... most older women in the cultures under consideration curse the fate which caused them to be born female, but do not seem to improve their daughters' lot even when they acquire a certain measure of power and are capable of instituting certain reforms... Thus older women are often the firmest holders of traditional customs. (30)

Acaad's analysis points out the need for women, at least in their later years, to be "compensated" in some way for their pain and suffering. In Efuru, the same remains true. The older women have already participated in the ritual process, and they feel that it is necessary for all other women participate also. The older women not only have the power to dictate that the rite of circumcision be performed, but also have the right to insist that Efuru find another wife for her husband after she is unable to give birth to any viable children. However, before any of these events occur, and prior to Efuru can think about giving birth to any children, she must undergo her bath. At this point in the discussion, I would like to turn to the importance of the use of the word "bath" to denote the circumcision of women.

"Bath" is the word that Nwapa uses for clitoridectomy, and according to Wilentz, bath is the Igbo term used in reference to female circumcision. Being the "good" wife, "good" daughter, and "good" mother that she must be, Efuru knows that she has to be clitorized. But just because she is a "willing" participant in the clitorization does not mean that Efuru is not "scarred," physically and psychologically, by the operation. It may seem to the cursory reader that Nwapa presents the operation and its aftermath in a matter of fact manner; however, upon a closer reading one may see that the main character undergoes a deep, yet subtle change after the surgery. Her life is forever altered by this "bath" that the author refers to as 'painful'.

The Oxford English Dictionary has several definitions for bath that include the following:

> The action of bathing; the immersion or washing of baptism; The action of immersing the body in, or surrounding it with, any medium, such as vapor, hot air, mud, to produce effects analogous to those of bathing; any particular liquid or mixture of liquids applied to the body to produce a certain remedial effect; in the hydropathic treatment of disease, any yielding medium as water, mud, sand, etc., in which the body is bathed or immersed, or with which it is sprayed or showered. (998)

A "bath," then, is something used to "wash or soak" the body in order to cleanse it from something dirty or impure, or an event that "cleanses" the body from a disease or impurity, in the medical sense. In the Greek scriptures, water is used

as a means to cleanse "sin" away from the soul and the physical person as convert (see Acts). Thus, water has a literal and a physical significance in the baptismal ceremony. The results are the same, though. In Western or other Christian societies, a cleansing takes place, and the person is eternally transformed. After the bath, the woman in the Igbo world is also considered "clean."

The circumcision, or the bath that Nwapa describes, is seen in the same manner. The removal of the clitoris is supposed to "cleanse" the woman from something that is 'unclean'. Efuru is told by her mother-in-law that she must have her bath before she conceives a child. There is little discussion in the novel about why it is important for this to occur before childbirth, but the women do make reference to one woman who was not circumcised before her pregnancy. In a conversation with Efuru and her mother-in-law, the woman who will perform the bath on Efuru, Omeifeaku states:

> 'You know Nwakaego's daughter?'
> 'Yes, I know her.'
> 'She did not have her bath before she had that baby boy who died after that dreadful flood.'
> 'God forbid. Why?'
> 'Fear. She was afraid. Foolish girl. She had a foolish mother, their folly cost them a son, a good son.'
> 'How did you know?"
> 'They came to me early one morning and told me. They wanted it to be done in my house so that people will not know. The dibia had already told them that the baby died because she did not have her bath. I did it for them...' (14)

Thus, it is the belief of these women that the child perishes because the mother is 'unclean', she is "impure" because she does not have her proper "bath" before the birth of her child. Nawal El Saadawi notes in her work, The Three Faces of Eve, that many women believe that the clitoris is an unclean entity: "When I discussed the matter with these girls and women it transpired that most of them had no idea of the harm done by circumcision, and some of them even thought it was good for one's health and conducive to cleanliness and 'purity'" (34). Also, as noted in the "Introduction" to this work, Asma El Dareer writes that "cleanliness" is the third most prominent reason given by males and females in her study for the continuation of female circumcision. She continues:

> They considered an uncircumcised girl to be dirty and impure because they believed an offensive discharge and smell emanates from the clitoris...When respondents were asked why they circumcise their daughters, they said 'We cannot leave them dirty and impure and smelly'...One midwife, said that she favors circumcision because it covers the genital area, thus preventing it from being contaminated. (73, Woman Why Do You Weep, my emphasis)

Various ideas about the "impurity" and "uncleanness" of the intact clitoris have persisted in various cultures. Hanny Lightfoot-Klein writes in Prisoners of Ritual that "The Bambara believe that the clitoris is poisonous, and will kill a man if it comes in contact with his penis during intercourse, " and she also notes that Olayinka Koso-Thomas writes "it is often agreed that circumcision maintains good

health in a woman" (38). Because the majority of interviewees in these studies are female, these instances re-emphasize the assertion noted earlier: women have now become the guardians of patriarchy because they themselves accept the derogatory ideologies associated with the minds, bodies, and spirits of themselves as women. But this acceptance is based on the need to survive, the need to validate their own experiences, and the need to make sense out of a sometimes hostile and almost totally incomprehensible world view. Hence, for the uncircumcised woman in a society of circumcised women, any and all instances of illness or sickness, still-born or untimely childhood deaths, or even male sexual problems may be attributed to the "dirty" clitoris. Efuru, understanding the ramifications of these beliefs in her society, submits herself to the operation. The description of the operation is brief, but illuminating:

> The woman went to the back of the house and there it was done. Efuru screamed and screamed. It was so painful. Her mother-in-law consoled her. 'It will soon be over, my daughter don't cry.' (14)

Efuru is even warned of the pain before the operation when Omeifeaku, the circumcisor, comes to her house on the day before the operation will occur: "'I will be gentle with you. Don't be afraid. It is painful, no doubt, but the pain disappears like hunger'" (13-14). Wilentz comments on this section as thus:

> From this passage we can see several ways in which Nwapa evokes the dilemma of female circumcision by utilizing the orality of the traditional culture...The woman practitioner who is there to help Efuru through the pain of circumcision does so by offering a proverb: 'The pain disappears like hunger.' The teaching of the tradition is passed on to the younger generation through an everyday speech sprinkled with proverbs and aphorisms. (7)

Although the proverbs and aphorisms are used to calm the fears of the young woman, it is soon apparent that the pain will not "disappear" quite as easily as a "hunger," once it is quenched by an appetizing meal. Efuru, throughout her life, until her meeting with Uhamiri, will hunger for love and acceptance, and a feeling of security she seems to lose after her circumcision. She desires, at some level, to become a part of the 'traditional' society. But it is a desire, a hunger that will never be quenched in the conventional society.

Efuru will remain confined to her home for one month after the operation. This is a period of rest, recovery, and "feasting" for Efuru. She, like the women Acaad describes, has undergone the traditional ceremony with dignity and pride, and she will now be "rewarded" for her courage and valor as one who has suffered her lot with honor and grace. It seems that Efuru is able to emerge from her confinement more beautiful than before:

> So on Nkwo day, Efuru dressed gorgeously. She plaited her lovely hair very well, tied velvet to her waist and used aka

> stones for her neck. Her body was bare showing her beautiful breasts. No dress was worn when a young woman went to the market after her period of feasting. Her body was exposed so that the people saw how well her mother or mother-in-law had cared for her. A woman who was not beautiful on that day, would never be beautiful in her life. (18)

Nwapa continues by articulating the voices and the comments of the people in the market as to the beauty and care of Efuru, but notes at the end of the section that "...underneath, something weighed Efuru down" (19). What is that something that now "weighed" her down? There is no mention of this extra weight before the "bath," but now something was quite different in Efuru. Noting a report from Elizabeth Moen, Lightfoot-Klein writes that women who have undergone circumcision often experiences feelings of "loss of self-esteem; feelings of victimization; severe anxiety prior to the operations; depression associated with complications such as infection, hemorrhage, shock, septicemia, and retention of urine; chronic irritability; and sexual frustration" (76). She also notes in her work that one physician who had given his own mother "complete autonomy" over the care of his daughters, stated that he only noticed that his daughters were "less hyperactive" after their circumcisions (9). Are these some of these same feelings experienced by the young Efuru after her surgery? Efuru is, of course, not a "little girl" like many of the respondents in Lightfoot-Klein's work; however, it is apparent that there is a change in Efuru. She

seems to go through the motions expected of her after her confinement and recovery, and her "period of feasting," but the reader is led to believe that her life will never be the same--that it has been totally and irrevocably altered.

The once rebellious and somewhat non-traditional woman becomes, in a very real sense, stoically conventional in several important ways after her operation. Instead of focusing on her life as a trader and a wife, Efuru is suddenly obsessed with bearing a child for her husband and his family. But this will prove to be a difficult task for Efuru. Motherhood comes to mean something very different for Efuru--it is to be the beginning of the end of a dream, and the introduction to another reality for a woman who is not able to live up to her communities' "standards". This seems to be quite a different actuality than Efuru envisioned when she ran away from her father to be with the man of her choice. As Carole Boyce Davies notes in the essay, "Motherhood in the Works of Male and Female Igbo Writers,"

> Before Efuru goes home to her father's compound she realizes that marriage was the beginning of her suffering"... that you cannot buy happiness of children ..., that living in a man's house means chores and subjugation to his whims. She wavers between helplessness and decisiveness" (251).

It is most certain that Efuru is shocked and horrified by the truth that faced her after the abandonment of her husband: life for a woman is filled with constraints and expectations established by society. But, then, how is Boyce-Davies

reading some of Efuru's other experiences? Is she reading 'as a woman?' Why is Efuru, in her eyes, "wavering," rather than attempting to find her place in society by exploring all available avenues (which for women were limited). Boyce-Davies must take the position that Judith Fetterely describes as a "resisting reader" in the introduction to her work, The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction. Fetterely notes that:

> Feminist criticism is a political act whose aim is not simply to interpret the world but to change it by changing the consciousness of those who read their relation to what they read (p. viii). The first act of a feminist critic is "to become a resisting rather than an assenting reader and, by this refusal to assent, begin the process of exorcising the male mind that has been implanted in us. (p. xxii)

Boyce-Davies must then attempt to "resists" that male reading of Efuru that will present her as the confused, disturbed woman. The "exorcism" of this "male mind" is a difficult task, even for the feminist critic, but this male mind must be altered before the complete Efuru will be able to emerge. Efuru, too, must exorcise her male mind. Frank notes that:

> The 'new woman,' or feminist, as Stegeman goes on to show, rebels against such traditionalism because she evinces a 'theory of personhood where the individual exists as an independent entity rather than a group member, where she is defined by her experiences rather than her kinship relations, where she has responsibility to realize her potential for happiness rather than to accept her role, where she has indefinable value rather than quantitative financial worth,

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> and where she must reason about her own values rather than fit into stereotyped tradition. (46)

This is the Efuru, who values herself and her being outside the realm of "stereotyped tradition" that will emerge at the end of the novel. Returning to Boyce-Davies, though, instead of reading Efuru as a "wavering" and "indecisive" being, (which are characteristic patriarchal definitions and descriptions of women), a woman reading as woman may interpret Efuru's actions as an exploration of her identities on the road to the discovery of her individuality. Efuru will find her most comfortable identity in her relationship with Uhamiri. It is an individuality that cannot thrive within the traditional world, but it is one that flourishes in a world where women are independent, assertive, and self-supportive. Before she is able to reach that point of fulfillment, however, she will attempt to find her solace in the male power structures.

While attempting to find solace in the role of the traditional Igbo woman, and in the face of the physical change that had taken place on her body and the alteration within her soul, Efuru will have to face the difficulty of being unable to conceive. This difficulty becomes the monumental and overbearing focus of her life:

> A year passed, and no child came. Efuru did not despair. 'I am still young, surely God cannot deny me the joy of motherhood,' she often said to herself. But her mother-in-law was becoming anxious... Neighbors talked as they were

> bound to talk. They did not see the reason why Adizua should not marry another woman since, according to them, two men do not live together. To them Efuru was a man because she could not reproduce. (24)

Even the women of the community begin to scorn Efuru for her inability to conceive by referring to her as a 'man.' It may seem that the women should display a heartfelt empathy for Efuru, but to the contrary, they are often the most adamant detractors and critics of her circumstances. Wilentz notes:

> In the following passage, we hear the voices of the community women speaking of Efuru's barrenness while they wash clothes at the stream. The passage emphasizes not only the importance of having a child but also the community's demand for it. Again, the women are often the most pitiless in protecting the traditions from which they do not always benefit... As upholders of tradition, women can be the harshest critics of those who cannot conform to a conventional role. They are caught in a bind because many of the traditions are not to women's advantage, but they must honor them. (12)

Like the ritual of circumcision, women insist that other women become good wives and mothers. Like Acaad's Muslim women, there is the need for the women in Efuru to validate their suffering, not just by inflicting pain on others, but by believing that they have truly gained strength from their experiences. If the younger generations question and remove all rituals and traditions, what will their misery signify? It will mean that their lives and pain, in a sense, are negated and their suffering was in vain. So, in their roles as

guardian of the traditions, (though not always gaining from this position), older women often epitomize the "best" and the worst of the patriarchy. Wilentz continues:

> ...even though we might assume that--as a woman--the speaker would be more understanding, clearly she feels her duty to function as the voice of community authority as well. She sees herself as the mouthpiece of community demands... Omirima represents a most obdurate custodian of cultural mores... The voices of these community women are sometimes harmless, other times sympathetic, but the traditional culture which has given them a powerful voice in the decisions of the society limits their choices. (121)

The women are the "custodians" of patriarchal norms, but their limited "power" is maintained by those in control--the men. This is not to say that women have no power or authority; it is earlier noted that the women who do undergo these traditional rituals with "pride and dignity" gain tremendous power in the family and the community. But their power must be restricted because if they are given the power to make the "real" decisions, the lives of men in power will eventually begin to alter, and they will lose their comfortable roles as "heads" of the household and community. This is a system designed to conquer from within; the men are, in a sense, without blame because the women become the main protectors of ritual. But none can totally escape the accountability for Efuru's pain--it will remain a part of her soul and the soul of her community forever.

It is of the utmost importance to note that although Efuru has undergone the ritual circumcision, the community remains focused on her body; however, now it is her sexual and reproductive organs--and the focus is no longer on what must be removed, but on what must be conceived. In her discussion of this subject in The Mermaid and The Minotaur, Dorothy Dinnerstein writes:

> woman, who introduced us to the human situation and who at the beginning seemed to us responsible for every drawback of that situation, carries for all of us a pre-rational onus of ultimately culpable responsibility forever after. (234)

It is in Efuru's heart (and the words of those in her community) that she feels 'ultimately culpable" for her inability to conceive. Woman as nurturer is responsible for society's ills; woman as barren is responsible for the demise of the community. In either case, woman is accountable.

Nwapa notes that Efuru has become a 'man' in her community because she is unable to bear a child, and she is accountable to her husband and the village people, as well as her own mother-in-law, who begin to think that it is time for Adizua to find 'real' woman, another wife who might be able to provide him with a child. This is because the idea of woman as a reproductive organism is such a dominant part of the belief system in a male-dominated society. There is no sympathy for the "barren" woman, as there is no sympathy for the uncircumcised. For example, Lucia Valeska notes that there also is a "stigma" associated with being a "barren"

woman in America. She notes that "the term 'childless' represents our society's traditional perception of the situation." Valeska comments that in the early American society, children were the only means to economic "well-being," and therefore, women who could not have children were viewed historically and culturally as unproductive women and the term "barren" became equated with "childless" in this culture. She continues: "To be childless still carries a negative stigma, even though the social and economic reality has drastically changed" (74). Although these examples are associated with American women, the literature of African women suggests that the idea of a woman as "barren" is similar--she is unproductive, unwanted, and not only pitied, but sometimes scorned and cast aside. [2]

And, in Efuru's case, the idea of "barrenness" is full of economic, societal, and familial implications. This is a question of her responsibility to the future of her community and to herself, but more importantly, of her obligation to her husband. For example, in his discussion of Buchi Emecheta's The Joys of Motherhood, Eustace Palmer makes a point that is apropos also to this novel: "Clearly, the man is the point of reference in this society. It is significant that the chorus of countrymen say, not that a woman without a child is a failed woman, but that a woman without a child for her husband

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[2]See Buchi Emecheta's The Joys of Motherhood for one example of the problems associated with being a "barren" woman in the Igbo society.

is a failed woman" (40). Likewise, Efuru becomes a "man" , or a "failed" woman, because she is not yet pregnant, and it is her husband who is "shamed" by her 'actions.' In her essay, Boyce-Davies writes :

> This vacillation between independence and dependence, masculinity and femininity, characterizes Efuru's existence up until the end of the novel where she leaves her second husband. Much of her feelings of insecurity stems from her inability to conceive and be the "complete woman" her society respects...Woman's responsibility for self is central in Efuru. There is persistently the fear of being considered a 'male woman'... (250-51)

The idea of independence is inherently tied to the idea of masculinity in Efuru's world, while the ability to conceive is tied to the ability to be female. An independent women is a man; a barren woman is a man. Culler notes that

> Men have aligned the opposition male/female with rational/emotional, s e r i o u s / f r i v o l o u s , reflective/spontaneous; (add to this list independent/dependent) and feminist criticism of the second moment work to prove itself more rational, serious, and reflective than male readings that omit and distort. (58, my addition)

The male reading of Efuru, then, (and female readings that result from women reading as men) have noted that Efuru loses her feminine side because she is unable to conceive, remain dependent, and thoughtless. But Efuru is, to the contrary, a woman who does not react to a situation without careful thought and planning. She is independent in a world of "dependent" women. Notably, even though her first husband

deserts her and does not have the decency to return to the funeral of his own child, Efuru remains in the home of her mother-in-law, not as a dependent, but rather as a self-sufficient woman. This action may seem incomprehensible to some women reading women's experience, but it demonstrates the depth of character that Efuru embodied, as well as her independent nature. She does not simply return to the home of her father for spiritual comfort or financial aid after abandonment; instead, she supports herself and relies only on the community of women who surround her for solace and assistance.

Efuru's inability to conceive and flourish outside the community of women is a constant source of concern for her husband, family, community, and her self. Her matrimonial life is put in jeopardy after she is unable to conceive a child immediately after her period of rest and recovery. The possible physical reasons for this inability to conceive, however, are never discussed in any of the analysis that I have read which refer to the novel, nor does the novel itself seem to address the issue of 'why' she is not able to conceive.

Studies have indicated a marked decrease in fertility in a number of women who have undergone circumcision. As Fran Hosken writes in the article, "Genital Mutilation of Women in Africa":

> The medical literature also mentions that as much as 25 percent of infertility in

> women is the result of genital mutilation, often because of infection of injury that interferes with conception or increases the risk of pregnancy wastage...clitoridectomy performed under septic conditions may result in ascending infection in the genital tract. (16)

It is possible that Efuru's inability to conceive was a direct result of her operation. But society does not even entertain this possibility. Instead, it is almost as though Efuru has "chosen" not to become pregnant--as if she is somehow preventing herself from conceiving. She is expected (and required) to go to the dibia, or the medicine man, in order to find a "cure" or a reason for her infertility. There is never a discussion of what could have physically caused her "problem," or if the "problem" could a result of the infertility of her husband. These things become somewhat insignificant, so to speak, because the main issue is that if Efuru does not have a child, it will mean the "demise" of her husband's paternal line. Wilentz notes:

> In a community that believes in the spiritual/genetic passage of values through kinship lines as well as environmental instruction, childlessness amounts to a cultural tragedy. A younger generation must continue the lineage from ancestors to descendants, and the community needs to people future generations. (12)

Brown responds to this issue of childlessness as follows:

> Accordingly, neighbors gossip, as they invariably do when Efuru remains childless a year after marriage. From their point of view, she is not a real woman: she is barren (p.23). When this "problem" recurs during Efuru's second

> marriage (to Eneberi) the comments are essentially the same. In this case the commentators are identified... Their settled views of women, marriage and motherhood are appropriately conveyed in highly formal dialogue reflecting a strong sense of social and rhetorical order and moving slowly from formal preliminaries to circumlocution, thence to a direct discussion of the immediate topic. (143)

Once again, Brown emphasizes that point that Efuru is viewed as a 'man" because of her inability to conceive. He notes that there is an emphasis on the patriarchal belief in a strong community and social structure with the maintenance of the status quo, rather than the unique individual Frank describes as a "feminist." The community views Efuru as "womb," and Brown does not seem to question the women in the novel who conform to this opinion.

Hence, the responsibility for the care, conceiving, and the nurturing of all the generations lies within the woman, the mother, the womb. Efuru accepts her circumcision as merely a part of her female responsibility. She also accepts her role as the "womb," but unlike other women, she is unable to fulfill the requirements of that position. And underneath, there is the inkling that the defiant young woman who left her father's home to marry the man of her choice is still waiting for the opportunity to emerge.

On the way to this opportunity, however, Efuru experiences the birth of her only child--a female, Ogonim.

Ogonim is the joy of her mother's life, and she is the child who tells the world that Efuru is not a "barren" woman:

> Efuru lay there thinking of it all. 'Is this happening to me or someone I know. Is that baby mine or somebody else's?" Is it really true that I have had a baby, that I am a woman after all. Perhaps I am dreaming.' (31)

Even Efuru herself starts to believe that she can not really be a woman until she is be able to have a baby. She needed to have a baby to prove to the rest of the world (and to herself) that she was a whole person.

In a world where male and female roles are assigned on the ability or inability to bear children, Efuru must conform to some of society' norms in order to function in that world. But after the untimely death of her only child, Ogonim, (whom seems insignificant to her father) and the unexpected desertion of her husband Adizua, Efuru is left in the position of the woman without a man, without a child--in essence, in her community, without a life. In a sense, Ogonim's death represents the unimportance of woman. As a female child, she will be missed, but her worth is not comparable, at least in the community, to a male child who would have been his father's heir. But even in the face of this tragic loss, Efuru does not totally succumb to society's pressures. She informs her mother-in-law that she is going to return to her father's house and attempt to begin a new life:

> A week after her return from Agbor she called her mother-in-law: 'Mother, I cannot stay anymore. A man said that he

> had wept for the death that killed his friend, but he did not wish that death to kill him. I cannot wait indefinitely for Adizua, you can bear witness that I have tried my best. (88)

Efuru endures two years of abandonment and suffering through the death of her only child alone after her husband deserts her, to emerge once again as the high-spirited young woman she was before her marriage. Her experiences--circumcision, marriage, betrayal, and death--have changed, but not totally destroyed her sense of self or being. Banyiwa-Horne writes that

> Nwapa's portrayal of her heroine present an in-depth study of womanhood. Her novel is a study of the growth of Efuru, and both her physical and psychological development are brought to light as she searches for options for self-actualization. Efuru begins by accepting the traditional sexually-oriented prescriptions for defining a woman's identity, but she moves gradually towards a new definition of a sense of self, a better option for self-definition. (125-26)

But along the road to what Banyiwa-Horne refers to as "self-actualization" and "self-definition," Efuru will attempt to conform, once again, to the ideal Igbo situation of marriage and motherhood. This will, once again, be to her detriment.

After a second marriage to an "unconventional" man who uses his given Christian name, Gilbert, more than his "African" name, Eneberi, Efuru thinks that she has finally found happiness. But the same thing occurs--no child is born from their union. Efuru is then, "encouraged" by her family-

in-law to find another wife for her second husband, after she is unable to have another child; but what she will soon find is that her husband has already taken another wife, and he is now the father of two sons. It is at this time that Efuru notes the presence of unusual dreams. Upon consultation with the dibia, she learns that she has been "chosen" by the river goddess Uhamiri to worship her. It is only within this relationship that Efuru's life seems to take on another dimension--it is an intense spirituality that begins to move her, at least figuratively, out of the realm of women whose lives revolves around husband and children. The experience of the woman as center has finally emerged.

In view of the relationship that Efuru will experience with Uhamiri, a constructed woman/feminist reader may see Efuru's spiritual experience as one of the most positive experiences of her life. Efuru will now be free to devote herself to spiritual and financial fulfillment because the ties that have attempted to bind her to marriage and motherhood are forever broken by fate. This spiritual connection is not only an honor for Efuru, but it is also a most probable answer to her prayers. Nwapa describes the position that this "honor" will mean for Efuru:

> 'You are a great woman. Nwashike Ogene, your daughter is a great woman. The goddess of the lake has chosen her to be one of her worshippers. It is a real honor. She is going to protect you and shower riches on you. But you must keep her laws. Look round this town, nearly all the storey buildings you find are

> built by women who one time or another have been worshippers of Uhamiri. Many of them came to me and asked me what to do.' (152)

Now Efuru will be able to concentrate on satisfying herself and her needs. The woman as an independent entity has evolved from the young, rebellious girl who left the home of her father. The emphasis here is on Efuru and her personal fulfillment. As Karla F.C. Holloway notes in Moorings and Metaphors: Figures of Culture and Gender in Black Women's Literature,

> Displacement of the traditional cultural values assigned to fertility and motherhood is Nwapa's thesis...In Nwapa's novel, the decentering of fertility and motherhood allows Efuru's spirituality to assert itself in their place. As the metaphorical center of this novel, womanspirit subverts the traditional, biological parameters of women's being. (171)

Here, the spirit of Efuru is center. The issues, ideas, and needs of woman are now of the utmost importance, and the woman herself has positioned herself in the heart of it all. Banyiwa-Horne also notes that:

> In Efuru's case, the supernatural becomes an extension of her sense of self...Uhamiri, the woman of the lake, the supernatural element in Nwapa's novel, is a symbolic representation of Nwapa's heroine, who is chosen as a special worshipper to this deity. Uhamiri becomes the alter ego of the matured Efuru who is invested with all Uhamiri's qualities...Efuru's acceptance of her role as a special worshipper of the woman of the lake, therefore, becomes a symbolic representation of her

> acceptance of herself as a person in her own right. (127)

In this case, the worship of the river goddess seems to finally release Efuru from her role as mother and womb because the villagers believe that women who worship Uhamiri can not have any children. But this does not release Efuru from the scorn of her in-laws and the belief of her community that she is still a failed and unfulfilled woman:

> 'She has spoilt everything. This is bad. How many women do you know who are worshippers of Uhamiri who have children? Answer me, Amede, how many?... Your daughter-in-law must be a foolish woman to go into that. Amede, you are to blame. Didn't you point this out to her? You are the mother, why didn't you point this out to her? (162)

Thus, although she is somewhat liberated from the traditional role as mother, it is still the community's belief that Efuru will remain unfulfilled because she will not have children. This is a male centered reading of Efuru's experience. Even though much of the voiced reaction is from women, it remains a male reading because of its inability to see woman as spiritually and financially independent as a positive experience for woman. Efuru is able, however, to devote her life to the fulfillment of her spirit. Holloway continues, "Nwapa's Efuru turns her life over to the goddess of the lake and replaces reality with her spirit. In this novel, Nwapa juxtaposes the social circumstances that abuse women against cultural and communal memories that can save them" (169) And Efuru is "saved" from the life of misery that is imposed upon

her by her community as a "barren" woman through the worship and communion with Uhamiri. Boyce-Davies asserts that:

> The novel does end on a positive note for we see Efuru realizing that her existence was not totally defined by motherhood. This confidence is given by the goddess of the lake to whom she becomes a priestess, and is the symbolic representation of acceptance of self.... The Woman of the Lake and Efuru's adherence to her reaffirm her belief in herself and her contributions to society and provide a societal alternative to motherhood for women "who are not so blest." (252)

It is the assertion of this reader that Efuru is finally "blest" because she is able to live outside the confines of the traditional role of wife and mother. Efuru's life circumstances have dealt her another reality--life's occurrences and the cruelty of two wandering husbands have taken away any hope for that life with the "joys of motherhood". Brown notes

> Efuru achieves independence within the community, not outside it, and her individualism is sanctioned by one set of the community's traditions (enshrined by the deity's presence) despite the fact that it departs from another set of traditions... Efuru displays that individualism which will eventually lead to her rejection of marriage and motherhood, and as a consequence, her education in the conventions of traditional womanhood is essentially ambiguous. Even as it prepares her for the traditional roles it also becomes part of the overall growth which eventually culminates in her religiously sanctioned declaration of independence. (144-45)

It is unclear why Brown considers Efuru's "education" in "tradition" as "ambiguous". It is apparent that Efuru attempts to conform to the norms, but she is unable to due to infertility problems (that could have been caused by her circumcision), and two unfaithful husbands. But is it just that her "education" in tradition prepares her for the role that she will accept at the end of the novel? Maybe, but reading this notation by Brown "as a woman," I think it is clear her that Brown underestimates the drive and individuality of Efuru. She does not become that independent woman merely as a result of her education; to the contrary, it seems that the education she receives in convention is the antithesis of what she becomes at the end of the novel. And although her independence is "sanctioned" by the community, it is apparent that it is not the norm, nor is it usually the position a woman or her family wishes as an endeavor for their female members. Thus, as Efuru turns to the river goddess, a womanspirit, for her release and refuge, she does exit that world of conventions and "womanly" expectations. The reader is not left, then, with the suggestion that Efuru will lead an unhappy existence; to the contrary, it seems that she has now found peace and a sense of self only after she being liberated from the traditions associated with marriage and motherhood.

After finally asserting her independence and leaving her second husband, who will accuse her of adultery, Efuru gains financial independence and stability. As the novel ends,

Efuru has just overcome a serious illness, and her rhetorical question, at the end of her thoughts may give one insight into the community of women who choose (in a sense) to be worshippers of Uhamiri:

> Efuru slept soundly that night. She dreamt of the woman of the lake, her beauty, her long hair and her riches. She had lived for ages at the bottom of the lake. She was as old as the lake itself. She was happy, she was wealthy. She was beautiful. She gave women beauty and wealth but she had no child. She had never experienced the joy of motherhood. Why then did the women worship her? (221)

Efuru's (and other women's) reasons for worshipping Uhamiri are understandable: she has a need to remove herself from a world which she can find no fulfillment, and she finds solace in her spiritual relationship with the goddess, which also elevates her to a position of respect in her community. She is altered by an operation that took possession of a part of her body and soul, but she is, in a sense, made "whole" again by her communion with the womanspirit. Holloway asserts

> At this point, Efuru's decision to dedicate herself to the service of the goddess, even in the midst of her marriage to Gilbert (Eneberi), articulates her intense dedication to the centering of womanspirit that the childless goddess represents. Both the Lady and Efuru are happy, wealthy, beautiful, and childless. But Efuru's understanding that the goddess could not assure her children... marks her dependence on the womanspirit she has nurtured and developed throughout her life. (177)

Efuru's wholeness does not result from the traditional world or adherence to the norms. She finds it, to the contrary, on the peripheral society in which women are financially independent, but childless. Schweickart asserts that a feminist reading of a text must focus on issues important and central to the experience of women. Thus, one must not view Efuru as a woman "alone," as Brown suggests in the following passage:

> Despite her admirable qualities, she cannot seem to sustain satisfactory relationships with men. After two unsuccessful marriages she finally determines that her personal fulfillment has to be attained, not by the conventional female roles of wife and mother, but by being alone and independent, (141)

but rather as one who has found herself complete and autonomous, like she is before the circumcision that will alter her sense of self and being. She is not "alone" as Brown proposes, but she is now in the community of women who no longer need husbands or children to validate their personal selves. In her new community of women who worship Uhamiri, one may wonder if the women not only worship her willingly, but even happily. Is it possible that the women who are 'chosen' to worship the river goddess are content because they know that they have escaped the fate of their counterparts? Is this one explanation for Efuru's query? Or is it merely the financial security that they desire? Holloway writes:

> Efuru's acquiescence to the spirit Uhamiri does not contain the threatening

> potential of Sethe's behavior. Uhamiri will be Efuru's spiritual salvation rather than her condemnation. The question posed in the closing lines... illustrates the recursive posture of the novel. Since... Nwapa figuratively connects spirituality and motherhood, (the) novel illustrates the gender-based revision of this equation in black women's texts. The literature of this tradition acknowledges that motherhood has a history of physical and spiritual damage Efuru knows, by the experiences documented in her community and by her own short-lived experience, that she must worry over it's potential, (172, emphasis Holloway's)

Thus, Holloway asserts, and I agree, that the motherhood of Efuru caused her great mental and spiritual "damage." But Nwapa is able to define motherhood in other ways. The goddess of the river is the mother of the childless women who gives them a different kind of "child' to nurture: a business. Motherhood is supposed to be the defining role for Efuru's existence. But she finds others role more suited for her needs. These roles are exemplified by her spirituality and economic autonomy. Her body and her mind have been excised, but her soul remains intact.

Thus, unable to flourish in a world of tradition, changed forever by an operation that she can neither reject or ignore, Efuru finds peace within herself by turning to the river goddess Uhamiri for spiritual consolation. She is unable to find any happiness among the community of rituals and constraints offered by her society. This reading of the novel, under the constructed guise of the female reader, must

emphasize that Efuru has to leave the traditional, male centered world in order to find solace. It is the experience of circumcision that forever alters her life and her sense of being. I can, then, see Efuru as an early "feminist" in search of her identity in a traditional world.

Nwapa rewrites woman's story in this early Nigerian woman's novel. She brings the ideas, thoughts, feelings, and desires of women to the center, rather than allowing them to remain on the periphery. Efuru's life is totally transformed after her bath. She continues her life on a journey to make herself complete and whole once again. It seems that the author provides only a spiritual escape for the women in the novel--but it is an escape worthy of notice. It is an escape from the world of female circumcision, of forced marriages, and of life as "womb." Without the confines of the life of motherhood and matrimony, Efuru and other Uhamiri worshippers gain financial, spiritual, and psychological freedom--something that they could never find in the world of the women of Efuru.

CHAPTER THREE
THE GIKUYU AND THE MISSIONARIES: THE IMPACT OF "SIN" IDEOLOGY AND "PREJUDUCE" ON A PROUD PEOPLE IN NGUGI WA THIONGO'S THE RIVER BETWEEN

> ...a person trying to understand a text is prepared for it to tell him something. That is why a hermeneutically trained consciousness must be, from the start, sensitive to the text's alterity. But this kind of sensitivity involves neither "neutrality" with respect to content or extinction of one's self, but the foregrounding and appropriation of one's own fore-meanings and prejudices. The important thing is to be aware of one's own bias, so that the text can present itself in all its otherness and thus assert its own truth against one's own fore-meanings. Truth and Method, 268, Hans-Georg Gadamer)

Gadamer asserts that when one reads a text, it is not necessary to approach the text from a position of "neutrality," but it is important to recognize one's own "prejudices." It is not enough, however, just to recognize these biases. One must, instead, put these presuppositions in the proper perspective in order to gain a "true" understanding of the work. In The River Between, Ngugi wa Thiongo presents the story of a community that is divided, physically and ideologically. The circumcision of teenage girls becomes the main focus of the divergence, particularly when one young woman, Muthoni, daughter of a converted Christian missionary, dies after having the operation performed against the wishes of her father. Ngugi brings an interesting element into his discussion of the Gikuyu puberty ritual--female circumcision as a 'sin' against the Christian God. As one who considers

herself a "womanist," to me, the idea of female circumcision is horrifying, at best. But in reading The River Between, I must confess that I gain an understanding of the cultural significance of the ritual. Utilizing the work of Gadamer, I will attempt to read this novel, not only with the recognition of my own prejudices, but also by articulating the prejudiced positions inherent in the missionary perspective, which significantly affected the complexity of the issue.

This first Ngugi novel presents the complexity of female circumcision in beautiful, poetic language, in order to introduce the reader to some of the conflicts in Gikuyu land before and after the arrival of Christian missionaries. The conflicts and controversies of Ngugi's ideas and ideologies, as well as his own conflicts about missionary's, politics, and education are prevalent throughout the work. Florence Stratton notes in her essay, "Narrative Methods in the Novels of Ngugi," that Ngugi's ideas and ideologies are most prevalent in this first novel. She writes:

> Although in The River Between Ngugi employs dramatic devices which become characteristic of his style, as will be discussed later, much less material is dramatized and much more is told to the reader in such a way that the reader is made more aware of the author's voice than is justified. (126)

Although I do not feel the need to "justify" the voice of the author in the novel, I concur with Stratton that the struggles and controversies of the author are quite present and quite articulate. In a 1967 interview, Ngugi relates his own

feelings about his state of being during the novel's development:

> I wrote The River Between first. I had come from a missionary school and I was deeply Christian. In school I was concerned with trying to remove the central Christian doctrine from the dress of Western culture, and seeing how this might be grafted onto the central beliefs of our people. (II)

Although Ngugi states here that he was "deeply Christian" when he wrote the novel, he also acknowledges that he was interested in removing the "central Christian doctrine from the dress of Western culture," in an attempt to reconcile the divergent doctrines and practices of Western Christianity with the "traditional" practices and customs of his people, without losing the spirit of the community. Later in the same interview, he tells the interviewer that he has given "up the Christian faith" by the time he arrives at the University of Leeds. This may account, in part, for Ngugi's anti-Christian, anti-colonial mode of representation that is found in his later novels, including Weep Not, Child. But Ngugi's view is not merely of a Christian "utopia." He draws the reader into the reality of a prejudice that effects his world. It is the kind of prejudice that Gadamer defines as "a judgment that is rendered before all the elements that determine a situation have been finally examined" (270). It would seem from reading missionary documents and essays, that many of those who travelled in Africa as missionaries had pre-conceived notions about the inferiority and barbarity of African peoples. These

ideas are apparent in the missionaries' approaches not only to female circumcision, but other African rites and religious ceremonies. I will discuss some of these views to articulate the affect of these presuppositions and prejudices on the people who lived in the "ridges" of Kameno and Makuyu. While investigating some of these prejudices and presuppositions of the missionaries in this novel, one must ask some important questions.

First of all, is there a specific point the author is attempting to make by his presentation of a "Christian" ideology that is introduced to the Kikuyu by the missionaries? What about the issue of female circumcision? Does the author believe that it should be abolished, altered, or maintained in the form it takes in the novel? Is the author's voice so prevalent that the argument becomes skewed or cloudy, or do the author's conflicts and concerns add to the understanding of the confusion surrounding the issue of female circumcision? Although I will not be able to answer all these questions in the scope of this brief study, I will attempt to explore the issues surrounding the questions pertaining to female circumcision in order to understand the presentation of characters and circumstances.

Ngugi presents the poetic vision of a beautiful community, bound together by ancient traditions and secrets before the arrival of the white people and the Christian missionaries: a place where the souls of the ancestors and the

creators thrive. The settings, Kameno and Makuyu, are separated by a river, but joined by the gods; isolated in unity and understanding. Ngugi writes:

> The ridges were isolated. The people there led a life of their own, undisturbed by what happened outside or beyond. Men and women had nothing to fear... Even other Gikuyu from Nyeri of Kiambu could not very well find their way into the hills. And so the country of many ridges was left alone, unaffected by turbulent forces outside. (3)

But there is the implication that something is askew in this "paradise." As Abdul R. JanMohammed writes in the work, Manichean Aesthetics,

> Both the background and the foreground of The River Between are directly concerned with an attempt to come to terms with the peripeteia of values in a colonial situation. The plot of the novel, set in the late 1920s and the 1930s, is centered once more on a combination of education and messianism, while the subplot examines the clash of values through the emotionally and culturally charged controversy over female circumcision. The geographical setting of the novel as well as the characterization of all the major protagonists are imbued with the dramatic and disruptive nature of cultural transition. The setting is allegorical: the events take place in the "heart and soul" of Gikuyu land and culture on two ridges that are ranged on either side of River Honia, which in Gikuyu means "Regeneration". (201-02)

On the surface then, this seems an illustration of a people who had led their lives, for the most part, unaffected by the outside world. It would seem that they were people who had never experienced a major conflict from within. Clifford

Robson also supports the thesis that the setting is mainly allegorical when he writes in his work, Ngugi wa Thiongo, that

> It is no coincidence that The River Between starts and finishes with the ridges. They are a pervasive feature of the novel: they symbolise a struggle, they represent a land, and they play a major part in Ngugi's conscious creation of the texture of Gikuyuland. (1)

"The river between" literally begins to represent the chasm that has developed as a result of the argument over female circumcision. Ngugi continues with the allusion that something is not quite right in this almost Edenic presentation. There is the hint, ever so slight, that all is not as it seems. He writes:

> The ridges slept on. Kameno and Makuyu were no longer antagonistic. They had merged into one area of beautiful land, which is what, perhaps, they were meant to be. Makuyu, Kameno, and the other ridges lay in peace and there was no sign of life, as one stood on the hill of God. (19)

These descriptions of an almost utopic world foreshadow what lies ahead--the surfacing of old conflicts and new rivalries which intensifies upon the arrival of the white missionaries. After the arrival of the whites and the conversion of many to the new religion, the village elder, Chege, voices his belief of inevitable change; from then on, the struggle between the "traditional" ways and the "new" ways become insurmountable. Definitive boundaries are drawn, and anyone stepping over those boundaries will have to pay dearly and perpetually. Nothing will ever be the same again:

> But the white man had come to Siriana, and Joshua and Kabonyi had been converted. They had abandoned the ways of the ridges and followed the new faith. Still people shrugged their shoulders and went on with their work, whispering:
> 'Who from the outside can make his way into the hills?' (9)

The village people do not perceive the significance of Chege's warnings and Joshua's conversion and are, thus, unable to accept the fact that a great transformation is about to occur within their community. What the people of Kameno and Makuyu will soon find is that one need not come from the outside to bring division and destruction to their "peaceful" existence. The white men are able to work through the converts, preaching their own version of "the Word of God" to instill loyalty, fear, and unquestioning devotion in their followers, while dividing and conquering the communities and bringing to the forefront the spiritual and ideological differences between the ridges. As Michael Rice notes in his work, "The River Between : A Discussion,"

> This novel presents the effects on an isolated Gikuyu community in the highlands of East Africa after its first contact with the white man. Ngugi avoids the temptation of depicting these people as exploited, manipulated and subjugated dupes of the Europeans. Instead, he leaves the reader in no doubt, as does Achebe in Things Fall Apart, that the tribe contains the seeds of its own downfall. (126)

As Rice notes, Okonkwo's great pride and refusal to acknowledge the changes that were about to occur in his community was a part of his downfall in Chinua Achebe's Things

Fall Apart. Similarly, Ngugi shows the reader that the convert Joshua's strict interpretation of a religious code of ethics presented to him by the missionaries, as well as Chege's own adherence and opposition to the new ideas of the colonists, and his proud spirit, will contribute to destruction in their communities. The people are not merely, then, conquered by European ideology, but are also defeated by their own stubborn arrogance. It will be his unyielding, intolerable insolence that will lead Joshua to his doctrine of "hell fire and brimstone" for those unwilling to end their 'evil ways' and forsake their ancestral traditions, while Chege's mixed message of infiltration and opposition will add fire to the controversy of "tradition" versus "progression." Joshua and Chege are representations of extremes; in thought, passion, and ideology both are staunchly entrenched in their positions. They recognize the prejudices and biases of the other. Gadamer notes that there must be the "recognition that all understanding inevitably involves some prejudice" (270). Hence, Joshua and Chege have come to an "understanding" of sorts, and they have taken strongly prejudicial approaches to the ideology of the other. But unlike Chege, Joshua feels that he has developed his prejudice from what Gadamer calls a "true understanding" of the facts surrounding the rituals and custom of his people. Gadamer continues by noting that all prejudice "does not necessarily mean a false judgement, but that part of the idea can be that it can have either a

positive or a negative judgement... The only thing that gives a judgment dignity is its having a basis, a methodological justification (270, 271). Because Joshua has, in his life, participated in the rituals of the community, it could mean that his "prejudice" is based on knowledge rather than mere presuppositions. However, Joshua is prejudiced not merely because of this "knowledge;" instead, he takes such a strong stance against female circumcision because the people that he emulates believe it is "sinful." If he was basing his reaction to the ritual on the medical statistics that surround the physical, emotional, and psychological complications that accompany female circumcision, this representation of the issue could be viewed as an honest presentation of the matter. But he does not approach the issue from this base of knowledge. He approaches it with dogma and is without understanding. He begins the crusade against the ritual by preaching the "Word of God" as it is presented to him by the Christian missionaries.

It is important to note that the missionaries, in most cases, viewed anything perceived as "traditional" or "African" in a negative manner; however, there was an especially negative interpretation of the custom of female circumcision. In a section entitled "The Church and Native Customs" from his work, A New Day In Kenya, Horace R. A. Philps, a Protestant Missionary writes

> Many of the customs of the natives of Kenya are distinctly repulsive, and none

> more so that the practice of female mutilation as carried out by the Kikuyu and allied tribes...Regarding the mutilation of females and young girls as an act of initiation into the full womanhood of the tribe, there can be no doubt whatever to those who know the facts. The whole custom is utterly revolting, and causes serious damage to the body and the mind... (165)

Thus, little inference is needed to understand this particular missionary's ideas regarding female circumcision (as well as many other Gikuyu cultural traditions). They regarded the rite as "utterly revolting"; certainly, this has an effect on those who choose to follow the "Christian" precepts presented to them by the communities in Gikuyu land. Although it is not clear which religious denomination or society of missionaries Ngugi presents in the work, there is little doubt from Joshua's reaction to Muthoni's circumcision that this group of missionaries would concur with Philps that the tradition was "distinctly repulsive" and needed to be abolished. The idea of female circumcision as sin was a great part of the Gikuyu land missionaries' religious teaching, and they believed in an interpretation of the "Word of God" that would free the Gikuyu people from their "dark" world of ancestral and idol worship.

The "Word of God" as presented by Ngugi which was introduced by the Christian missionaries in Kikuyu land was one filled with a God of wrath, ready and willing to condemn to "hell fire" anyone who would not follow Him. Philps defines the "theology" of the United Methodist Church in 1913 in the Kikuyu community as follows:

> The basis of federation shall consist of the loyal acceptance of the Holy Scriptures as our supreme rule of faith and practice; we accept the Apostolic and Nicene Creeds as a general expression of the fundamental Christian belief, and in particular we declare our belief in the absolute authority of the Holy Scriptures as the word of God, in the Deity of Jesus Christ, and in the atoning death of our Lord as the ground of our forgiveness. (35-6, my emphasis)

Thus, the converts were not only expected to accept "loyally" the teachings of the church, but they must also believe and accept that the "word of God," represented in the Holy Scriptures, (Greek and Hebrew), as the "absolute authority" of their lives. It was this type of adamant and forceful ideology that met Joshua on his way to Christian "rebirth." Joshua, now the converted preacher, remembered what the missionaries at Siriana had told him before his 'rebirth':

> Those who refuse him are the children of darkness; These, sons and daughters of the evil one, will go to Hell. They will burn for ever more; world unending.
>
> These strong words frightened Joshua and shook his whole body; shook him to the very roots of his being. He became baptized and it was only then that he felt at peace and stopped trembling. (34)

The missionaries' words were used to instill not only total commitment to the new religion, but also fear in the converts. Gadamer notes that this idea of using the Bible as a means of "absolute authority," as an "historical document," "endangers its own dogmatic claims" because, he asserts, "the written tradition of Scriptures... can claim no absolute validity

(272)." Hence, in their staunch support of Biblical assertions (whether accurately portrayed or not), the missionaries did "endanger" their claims because the people, like Muthoni, are unwilling and unable to accept the message not only because they are attempting to resist the teachings of the missionaries, but, most importantly because they will invalidate generations of her fore-mothers and fore-fathers beliefs and practices. The truth of their lives cannot, then, be based just on the written word, but there must also be an understanding of that word that is written within its proper cultural, social, and political context. It is not enough for the missionaries to simply assert that circumcision is against the law of God. The people of Gikuyu land need more than just the "authority" of the Scriptures. However, the result of these teachings against the female circumcision rite is a community separated by those who insisted on maintaining the "traditional" values and rituals, most forcefully represented by the ritual of female circumcision, and those who believe that the "white man's God" is the only God to follow, and who will denounce or refuse to practice any of the "traditional" rituals. Ngugi brings this conflict, as represented most adamantly by the community of elders to the forefront of his discussion. JanMohammed notes that

> Characterization too is stylized to reflect this antagonism between the desire for cultural purity and the desire to abrogate the traditional society. Among the older generation which provides the secondary characters, the opposition

> is embodied in Chege...and Joshua...Ngugi balances the static and absolute cultural oppositions that are embodied in Chege and Joshua with the dynamic and relativistic attitudes of their children... (220)

The ideas of the older generation are perceived as immovable. There is no room for compromise or reconciliation. But the younger generation will attempt to conciliate the differing views of Chege and Joshua. It will be the actions of the children that will bring the people to the heart of their conflict. Joshua's daughter Muthoni becomes the literal and symbolic emblem of division and contention, while Chege's son Waiyaki will attempt to use his knowledge of the white man's educational system to insure the survival of his ancestral customs. It is the act of Muthoni, in defiance of her father, and the community's varied responses to this act, that seems to guide the community into its almost certain and complete division.

Muthoni is the elder of the two daughters of Joshua. She is reared in a home which follows the precepts of the Christian missionaries at Siriana after her parents' conversion; however, she has a definitive desire to make herself a "true" Gikuyu woman by participating in the traditional Gikuyu circumcision ceremony. David Sandgren notes in his work, Christianity and the Kikuyu, that

> Circumcision was the central focus of Kikuyu initiation. There were equivalent rites for both men and women. The operation was only the outward sign of an inner transformation to adulthood. This

> transformation was fostered by the whole of traditional education when Kikuyu boys and girls learned from an early age about pastoral and agricultural skills... (71)

Thus, this ceremony is of the utmost importance to the community, as Sandgren notes, and it is the "outward sign" of the change that will take place as one went from childhood to adulthood. In his anthropological account of The Southern Kikuyu Before 1903, L.S.B. Leakey describes the practice of "female circumcision" as practiced by the Kikuyu as follows:

> When all the girl candidates were in position and ready in a line in the order of seniority and facing Mount Kenya, the female operator knelt before the senior girl candidate. With her left hand she parted the labia majora and took hold of the clitoris between the thumb and first finger of her left hand. Pulling it forward as much as she could, she cut off a tiny portion of the skin, using a special sharp razor to do so... Sometimes the operator also excised a little piece of the labia majora on either side of the clitoris. (622)

This operation could be defined as the "Sunna" circumcision discussed earlier. But the important point here is that the significance of the ceremony could not be denied for young Muthoni.

Aware of its cultural importance, Muthoni insists upon initiation. In the first of many conversations with her sister, Nyambura, on the subject of circumcision, Muthoni reveals her innermost feelings:

> 'I have thought and thought again about it. I have not been able to eat or sleep properly. My thoughts terrify me. But I think now I have come to a decision.'

> She stopped; gazing past Nyambura, she said, slowly and quietly: 'Nyambura, I want to be circumcised.' (28)

Muthoni's desire to fulfill what she views as her tribal obligation is, at first, shocking to her younger sister. But she is vocalizing the thoughts of many of the young girls living within Christian households who feel that the ritual is the most important part of their feminine and tribal development. As recently as September of 1993, the idea of female circumcision as an integral part of feminine development was voiced on an episode of the weekly ABC newsmagazine Day One. While being interviewed, a Somalian woman noted her own feelings about her circumcision, (which she felt had not altered her life in any negative manner), while stating that she could not imagine her own two daughters growing up and marrying a man from within their cultural tradition without being circumcised. Thus, even in the face of "modern" opposition and a movement to eradicate completely the ritual of female circumcision, modern, educated women maintain that the ritual is so important that they consider (as many others consider) having the procedure performed on their own daughters. Hence, it is understandable that young women like Muthoni will feel the need to participate in these ceremonies. Muthoni's decision, consequently, is a difficult one. Michael Rice points out:

> At the same time, she articulates the dilemma of all those like her who have become confused by the rival claims of foreign ideas which they do not

> understand and have not properly assimilated. (129)

Thus Muthoni, and others like her, are caught between different worlds and ideologies, and they do not know how to, nor do they desire (in many instances) to make a choice between female circumcision and Christianity. They are caught in the middle of an argument that they do not understand at one of the most difficult times of their lives--adolescence. The importance of adolescence in the Gikuyu tradition cannot be exaggerated. Puberty was the time when all Gikuyu children, male and female, began to join the ranks of the adults in their society. They participated not only in the circumcision rite, but also in other adult responsibilities. The missionary community focused only on the circumcision rite, without regard to the consequences that would take place after the alteration of a ritual that was of such vital importance in the lives of the Gikuyu. Gadamer points out that

> meanings cannot be understood in an arbitrary way. Just as we cannot continually misunderstand the use of a word without its affecting the meaning of the whole, so we cannot stick blindly to our own fore-meaning about the thing if we want to understand the meaning of another... All that is asked is that we remain open to the meaning of the other person or the text. (268)

Joshua and the other missionaries inability to "remain open" to the circumcision rite, and their devaluation of the entire process, resulted in the underground circumcision that left

Muthoni near death. These missionaries do "stick blindly" by their conviction that female circumcision is a sin, and they do not even attempt to understand the cultural significance of the ceremony. They can not understand the importance of the ritual because they refuse to remain open to any meaning other than their own biased, prejudiced interpretation. For example, in a volume of essays entitled, Kikuyu 1898-1923: Semi-Jubilee Book of the Church of Scotland Mission, Kenya Colony, although the authors acknowledge the importance of female circumcision to the Gikuyu, they are quick to deconstruct the idea of the importance of female circumcision in the harshest, most cynical tones:

> It has already been remarked, however, that the songs sung at these dances are objectionable, and these are not the only evil features of these rites, which, though doubtless based on "religious" conceptions, must, in as far as they are impure, have an inevitable degrading effect. Their existence and tremendous importance in the natives' eyes form one of the chief difficulties against which the missionaries have to contend. (21)

With the use of words such as evil, impure, degrading, and difficult(ies), this missionary account portrays a colonizing community with undoubtedly preconceived notions about the moral and psychological inferiority of the African peoples and their customs. The prejudice here is based on a total misunderstanding and misinterpretation of the Gikuyu ritual. The stage is set for conflict and confusion, and what the Gikuyu must fight against is the uneducated fore-thought of

the European community because that uneducated fore-thought, that lack of understanding and knowledge, had so often led to the alteration or total obliteration of all things the indigenous peoples held as sacred, important, and defining.

Muthoni and the other young women in her community had been prepared for the moment of circumcision for most of their lives--it is a sacred, unquestioned tradition. But now outsiders (and even their parents) tell them that the ritual is "sinful." However, that argument is not enough in and of itself to deter Muthoni from her conviction. As Jomo Kenyatta notes in Facing Mount Kenya, female circumcision is of great importance to the Gikuyu:

> The initiation of both sexes is the most important custom among the Gikuyu. It is looked upon as a deciding factor in giving a boy or girl the status of manhood or womanhood in the Gikuyu community. This custom is adhered to by the vast majority of African peoples and is found in almost every part of the continent. (133-34, my emphasis)

Although Kenyatta's book was originally published in 1938, there is definitive evidence that many individuals, including women, continue to believe that this ritual is of the utmost importance for the sexual safety and communal conformity of their daughters. For example, Hanny Lightfoot-Klein notes in her "Appendix" that the majority of the women she interviewed had already had or were planning to have the operations performed on their daughters, even though many of them had experienced severe pain and physical problems as a

result of their own circumcisions. She also noted that many of the women felt that they had lost nothing (sexually) by being circumcised. The woman she discusses as "History #5", a woman from Saudi Arabia who had been pharonically circumcised, (the most dramatic form of circumcision which includes removal of all the outside parts of the vagina and the infibulation, or "sewing up" of the female genitalia) tells Lightfoot-Klein that "she thinks pharonic circumcision is a good practice, and feels she has lost nothing by her own circumcision" (253) (At the time of this interview, her oldest daughter had already been pharonically circumcised, and she was planning to have her other two daughters circumcised in the same manner.) With this in mind, one can understand the dilemma of Muthoni, who is trying desperately to intermingle her differing worlds. She can not understand why, suddenly, the circumcision of women is sin when, for years and years, her mother and her mothers' mothers had been circumcised. She has to make a choice--a very personal choice--but it is a choice that will affect her community forever. But it is not merely that the missionary's view this particular female issue negatively. In general, they tend to view everything about these women in a negative manner.

This negative view of Africa and African women is not new nor unique. In the missionary account of the Kikuyu from 1898 to 1923, this is the manner in which the missionaries describe the life of the African woman:

> A woman's status is that of a superior chattel. She is never at any time her own mistresses, but always the property of some one, as likewise her children, is she has any. Before being "bought" in marriage she belongs to her father, or if an orphan, to some member of his family; after being "bought" she belongs to her husband... The disadvantages of this system arise from the inferior status it accords to women; the curtailment of their liberty to choose freely who they will marry,... and the complications and great amounts of litigation which occur when marriage agreements are broken. (Kikuyu, 1898-1923, 22, 23)

To say that the missionaries are being very critical of the Kikuyu, and quite hypocritical, in general, is probably a gross understatement. During the time which this account documents, 1898-1923, European women, and Western women in general, were fighting for the right to vote, and the right to be viewed as equal in their societies. These are rights that women all over the world continue to fight for in 1993. Thus, for the missionaries to recognize that the status of African women as that of "superior chattel," while not recognizing the complexity of women's issues in their own communities they remain, once again blindly, entrenched in their negative notions about African society and African peoples. These notions and preconceptions greatly affect the African interaction and response to the missionaries. Ngugi continues to evaluate these responses and the consequences of differing actions as the novel continues.

As the novel progresses, Muthoni is allowed to die a slow and painful death after her operation. Is Ngugi, here, making

his own personal commentary on the issue of female circumcision? Is he saying that the Christians are correct and that Muthoni has suffered the wrath of an angry God because of her disobedience? Or is he directing his criticism at the missionaries, showing how their indifference, intolerance, and interpretation of one 'Christian' doctrine causes the death of the young woman and her total dissociation with her parents? Or are there other reasons for her death? Is it a tool of dramatic presentation for the author? Are there other possibilities? Florence Stratton notes that

> it would seem that at the time of writing his first novel, Ngugi had not entirely mastered dramatic presentation. This is one reason among others, such as unintegrated sociological material and melodramatic elements why The River Between is a less accomplished novel than the later ones. (126)

Though I do not agree that this novel is "less accomplished" than Ngugi's later novels, I do agree that stylistically and metaphorically the later novels, such as Devil On the Cross, are more artistic. I do believe, though, that The River Between presents very difficult questions, such as a concrete ideological conflict within a community, and he uses the highly controversial issue of female circumcision to highlight the conflict. Ngugi's presentation of Muthoni's slow and painful death does add an element of the melodramatic, especially with the proverbial use of the 'dying words' of the young character which are repeated (and manipulated) to correspond with the needs of those retelling the story. Ngugi

does not seem to present an absolute resolution on any side of the argument. He does, though, seem to present a picture of the hypocrisy of the missionary community in their interpretation and dogmatic view of female circumcision as "sin".

I noted earlier that the presentation of this "Christian" community in Gikuyu land is that female circumcision is a "sin" against the Christian God. This idea of sin was an important part of the missionary teaching in Kenya. For example, in his account of the Presbyterian Church in Kenya, R. MacPherson notes

> The missionaries pursued the classical themes of evangelical revival--the love of God and the power of evil, the sin of men and God's judgement on sin, the reconciliations of God and men through faith in the sacrificial death of Christ... (89, my emphasis).

Thus, the "sin of men and God's judgement on sin" was one of the "classical themes" of the Presbyterian missionaries in the communities in Kenya, and the idea is prevalent in the novel. What is most important for this discussion is to understand and review Nyambura's response to her sister after she reveals her plans to be circumcised:

> 'Besides,' 'you are a Christian. You and I are now wise in the ways of the white people. Father has been teaching us what he learnt at Siriana. And you know, the missionaries do not like the circumcision of girls. Father has been saying so. Besides, Jesus told us it was wrong and sinful.' (29, my emphasis)

Nyambura has been taught to believe that the act of female circumcision is a sin against the Christian God, and there is no room, in Nyambura's mind, to question her Christian teaching. It is sometimes difficult to understand that all that is written can not always be accepted as evidence of a statement or an assertion. Gadamer comments on the use of the "written word" as "proof" as follows:

> It is not altogether easy to realize that what is written down cannot be untrue. The written word has the tangible quality of something that can be demonstrated and is like a proof. It requires a special critical effort to free oneself of the prejudice in favor of what is written down and to distinguish here also, no less in the case of oral assertions, between opinion and truth. (272)

Nyambura is unable to "free herself" from the opinions and assertions of the missionaries, whereas Muthoni is "freed" by her ability to establish her own "truth" and meaning in her life, separate from her father and the missionary community. To Nyambura and others, if it is written, if it is said by one in authority, then it must be true. Gadamer continues by noting, though, as earlier quoted, the "scriptures, like any other historical document, can claim no absolute validity; the possible truth of the tradition depends on the credibility that reason accords it" (272).

If Muthoni is able to reason her own truth outside the representation of the Christian community, she can only find that she must partake in the initiation ceremony because that is the reality and the truth of her life. The missionary

"text," is therefore discounted, because it does not allow her an interpretation of herself and her community that she can find peace within. And if Muthoni can read the Bible for herself, (which is most likely the case because of the missionary's emphasis on reading the scriptures and educating the people), she should have been acquainted with a few of the manners in which the Hebrew and Greek Scriptures present the issue of circumcision. [3]

It is important to note that, in the Hebrew scriptures, circumcision was a Jewish rite instituted by God as a covenant between Himself and Abraham. First of all, Genesis 17 notes that God made a covenant with Abraham which noted that this God would now become the God of Abraham and all of his future generations. He stated:

> And I will make my covenant between me and thee, and will multiply thee exceedingly... As for me, behold, my covenant with thee, and thou shall be a father of many nations...And I will give unto thee, and to thy seed after thee, the land wherein thou art a stranger, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God. (2,4,8)

Chapter 17 continues with the description of what would be the sign of the covenant between God and Abraham: the circumcision of the foreskin of every male child. Verses 10-11 state:

> This is my covenant, which ye shall keep, between me and you and thy seed after

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[3]See R.A. Macpherson and his discussion of the Kikuyu ritual for details. Bibliographic information available in the list of works cited.

> thee; Every man child among you shall be circumcised.
> And ye shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin and it shall be a token of the covenant betwixt me and you.

This was an agreement between God and Abraham which established a physical difference between Jewish men and all other men in the world. This was an important part of Old Testament doctrine. In the work, People of the Covenant: An Introduction to the Old Testament, an exegetical discussion of the Old Testament written in 1963, the authors note that

> Abraham and his descendants were commanded to keep the covenant throughout their generations and circumcision was introduced as the seal of their covenant. This elaboration of the covenant belongs to the Priestly traditions and is particularly concerned with circumcision as a cultic rite. (88-9)

Hence, even if the missionaries could contend that circumcision was 'wrong,' because the Gikuyu use the rite as a puberty initiation and not as a representation of any covenant between the Gikuyu people and any god, female circumcision does not have the same meaning for the Gikuyu people. Hence, unless the person was a Jewish male, this argument could be invalidated for the Gikuyu. However, even if it was a valid contention, New Testament doctrine changes the significance of the ceremony.

In the New Testament it is noted that this 'physical' sign of difference and symbolic sacrifice no longer carries the same relevance in the Christian world. For example, Galatians 5:6 notes that, "For in Jesus Christ neither

circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision; but faith which worketh by love," while

Colossians 3,11 states:

> Where there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision, Barbarian, Scythian, bond nor free: But Christ is all, and in all.

Furthermore, Romans 3,25-29 adds these important statements to the discussion of circumcision.[4]

> For circumcision verily profiteth, it thou keep the law: but if thou be a breaker of the law, thy circumcision is made uncircumcision.
> Therefore if the uncircumcision keep the righteousness of the law, shall not his uncircumcision be counted for circumcision?
> And shall not uncircumcision which is by nature, if it fulfill the law, judge thee, who by the letter and circumcision dost transgress the law?
> For he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh:
> But he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God.

Romans, 3-4 continues in the same vein, <u>never</u> stating that circumcision is sinful or wrong, but that now through "faith and love" and because of the death and bloodshed of Jesus Christ, there is no longer a spiritual difference, (or the need for an outward physical difference) between 'Jew' and 'Gentile,' or the 'circumcision' and the 'uncircumcision', and that all now have a right to "the Tree of Life." These

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[4]I must note here that all Biblical discussions of circumcision refer to male circumcision.

Biblical statements may be interpreted to indicate that one need not circumcise himself or herself physically in order to become a part of the "Kingdom of God," but instead, s/he must 'circumcise' themselves spiritually and inwardly by changing the heart and completely turning over their being to the "Will of God." One could, of course, argue that female circumcision is a "sin" because it violates the equality of persons in God. However, as historical and missionary accounts continually note the "intellectual and moral" inequality of not only Africans in general, but, more specifically, women in the eyes of men, this argument has no foundational context within the realm of this study.

It is interesting to note however, that the Apostle Paul, (and other apostles) faced harsh criticism and ostracism from other Christian Jews because he preached against the need for this outward show of loyalty as represented by the circumcision of the male child. In the work, People of The Covenant, it is noted that "Later, Israel made much of this sign, actually excluding from the covenant community any who did not keep the 'covenant in the flesh'" (89). Thus, in this African community, people are ostracized for participating in the circumcision ritual, while earlier in the Christian community, others were cast out for not participating in the ritual. Charles E. Nnolin discusses the hypocrisy of the Christians regarding the issue of female circumcision in his

essay, "Background Setting: Key To The Structure of Ngugi's The River Between." He writes,

> what Ngugi does in The River Between is to use irony to depict a gentile society in Africa that holds more fanatically to circumcision for total acceptance into the tribe than did the early Jewish Christians. And as if this were not enough, Ngugi sketches vividly for the reader an African convert to Christianity, Joshua, who abhors with fanaticism anyone submitting to the ritual: to Joshua, by submitting to circumcision, his daughter Muthoni "had sold herself to the devil"... (142)

Thus, both the early Christian community and the African Christian community are home to "fanatics;" neither willing to compromise, neither willing to adhere to or yield to the precepts of the other--all strongly entrenched in dogma.

Why, then are these Gikuyu told that Jesus made such statements against circumcision? This may be one of the many instances in which people have used the Bible, and other religious and philosophical ideologies, as instruments to benefit their own personal agendas, and one in which individuals or groups of people use scriptural texts to express their own, particular sentiments about (usually) controversial issues. It may also have been a manipulation of doctrine to assist the missionaries in ending what they viewed as an unusually painful and dangerous ritual for the Gikuyu females.

One notable example of another use of Christian doctrine as dogma to subjugate a people was the American slave system.

The slave holders and supporters of slavery were notorious in their use of Biblical passages to keep their slaves docile and obedient. Note the writings of Harriet Jacobs, for instance. In her work, Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, she recalls one sermon she and other slaves attended after the Nat Turner Insurrection had occurred, in which several slaves holders and their families had been killed. The Biblical text for the sermon was "Servants, be obedient to them that are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in singleness of your heart, as unto Christ." Jacobs writes:

> Pious Mr. Pike brushed up his hair till it stood upright, and, in deep, solemn tones began: Hearken, ye servants! Give strict heed unto my words. You are rebellious sinners. Your hearts are filled with all manner of evil. 'This the devil who tempts you. God is angry with you, and will surely punish you, if you don't forsake your wicked ways...Instead of serving your masters faithfully, which is pleasing in the sight of your heavenly Master, you are idle, and shirk your work. God sees you. You tell lies. God hears you. (69)

The Reverend Mr. Pike continues his sermon by telling the servants that they must return to their homes and work diligently and happily for their masters because that is the will of the Almighty, and that if they do not do this, they will suffer the consequences of their sin at the hands of an angry God. Jacobs and others like Frederick Douglass recognized the use of deception and dogma, most especially after they were able to read the Bible for themselves and

interpret their own meanings, but this did not end these types of teachings.

In his autobiography, The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave, Douglass discusses the slave owners use of Biblical passages and religious doctrine to keep their slaves submissive, controlled, and most importantly, "in their place." He describes some of the "religious" slaveholders as follows:

> I should regard being the slave of a religious master the greatest calamity that could befall me. For of all slaveholders with whom I have ever met, religious slaveholders are the worst. I have ever found them the meanest and basest, the most cruel and cowardly, of all others. It was my unhappy lot not only to belong to a religious slaveholder, but to live in a community of such religionists...Mr. Weeden owned, among others, a woman slave whose name I have forgotten. This woman's back, for weeks, was kept literally raw, made so by the lash of this merciless, religious wretch. (Douglass' emphasis, 85-6)

North American slave narratives are filled with discussions of the cruelty of "religious" slave masters, as well as the use of the Greek and Hebrew Scriptures as a means of keeping slaves subject to their masters. [5]

In short, in their zeal to end the circumcision of females, which they deemed not only as sinful, but also "barbaric," the missionaries used measures similar to

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[5]See the Works of Phyliss Wheatley, Octavia Rogers Albert, and Harriet E.W. Wilson's account of her life as a "free" black in the north for further examples.

slaveholders by only reading or teaching certain passages in the Greek and Hebrew scriptures that would support their claims.

And as a newly "born again" Christian, Nyambura is quick and careful to respond to anything viewed as "sinful" in a drastically negative manner. The "completely" converted Nyambura, hence, feels the need to continue to plea with her sister to reconsider her decision, using a "Christian" philosophy as taught to her by her father and the missionaries at Siriana as her touchstone:

> Why do you want this? You know this is the devil's work. You know how he tempts people. You and I are Christians. Were we not baptized long ago? Are you not now saved from sin? (29)

Once again, circumcision as 'sin' is the center of Nyambura's argument. She is now firmly entrenched in the missionary-style Christian doctrine presented by her father and the other missionaries at Siriana, the location of the mission schools. Philps continues his account, which reflects the feelings and reactions of Nyambura:

> The African Christian Church amongst the Kikuyu early saw the sinfulness of this revolting custom and took steps to abolish it as far as professing Christians were concerned, although it could not interfere with its practice by the heathen. On one occasion, amongst others known to the writer, at an African Conference held at Tumutumu in January 1920, the African leaders themselves voted that this custom must be abolished as far as the Christians were concerned. (165)

Again, the prejudicial view of the missionaries stems from their own misunderstanding of the people. Gadamer asserts that

> A person who is trying to understand a text is always projecting. He projects a meaning for the text as a whole as soon as some initial meaning emerges only because he is reading the text with particular expectations in regard to a certain meaning. Working out this fore-projection, which is constantly revised in terms of what emerges as he penetrates into the meaning, is understanding what is there. (267)

Philps fails to realize "what is there," and to gain any understanding because he refuses to abandon his fore-projection of negative imagery on the Gikuyu people and their rituals. He sees no need to understand something he describes as "disgusting," and "utterly revolting." There is only the need to change it; to make certain that it exists no more.

Ngugi presents a complex picture of a community that is ideologically and spiritually at odds over the issue of female circumcision; it is in a state of confusion, and change is inevitable. This ritual will become the symbol of difference between the communities; but the reasons for the division are much more complicated. Like Ngugi's community, divided by the river, there are differences that caused rifts between the old and the new; youth and traditional wisdom, and the colonizer and the colonized. The Christian missionaries seize upon this moment of crisis and confusion in order to further alienate

the communities from each other. Now they will use other methods of disenfranchisement to divide and, ultimately, to conquer the communities.

The fight between the Christian missionaries and the traditional Gikuyu will continue to escalate as time continued. Kenyatta notes that the missionaries made several attempts to obliterate completely the rite of female circumcision in Gikuyu land. They used several methods, including banning from school children whose parents will not denounce the rite, or those who allowed their children to participate in the ceremonies. He writes:

> In 1929, after several attempts to break down the custom, the Church of Scotland Mission to Gikuyu issued an order demanding that all their followers and those who wish their children to attend schools should pledge themselves that they will not in any way adhere to or support this custom, and that they will not let their children undergo the initiation rite. This raised a great controversy between the missionary and the Gikuyu. (130)

It is this "great controversy" that will become the central argument in the novel after the death of Muthoni--the right of the Gikuyu children to attend missionary schools. The quotation above is important as it is illustrative of what will happen to the community after the arrival of new ideas and methods of advancement presented by the white society. There are now questions of education and mobility facing the people of the ridges. Only the children who attended the missionary schools can learn the "ways" of the white man and

help the community survive the changes that are inevitable with the change of time, leadership, and the arrival of the whites. But if their children are barred from the schools, they will not be able to "advance." In his work, The Novel as Transformation Myth, Kandioura Drame writes,

> In The River Between, the prophecy is interpreted by Chege as a myth of education. School education in the ways and secrets of the white man was expected to bring freedom, and when the white people denied the Gikuyu the use of their schools, the Gikuyu built separate schools. (36)

These separate schools will be the focus of the remainder of the novel. However, returning to Joshua, as a convert, he will decide to serve the Christian God at all costs, even if it means cutting off himself (and his family, he thought) from the traditional Gikuyu community in Kameno.

Joshua not only becomes a zealous supporter of all things "Christian," but he also becomes a major force against the traditions in his community. He begins to associate anything traditional with "paganism." In several missionary accounts noted previously, the authors frequently use the word "pagan;" it seems only to have reference to those who were not "Christian" rather than those who were not "religious" since the majority of the missionary reports acknowledge the spirituality of the different African communities. [6] In his

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[6]See Bewes, Kikuyu Conflict, for a detailed example. BibliBibliographic information available in the list of Works Cited for this chapter.

harshness, Joshua becomes most unlike the Christ he purports to emulate by developing a staunchly critical and totally unforgiving spirit. In one of his most memorable moments, Christ asked God the Father to forgive those who are crucifying him, because as he said, "They know not what they do" (Luke 23,34). Rice adds:

> Joshua has learnt little from his conversion to Christianity of the spirit of love, forgiveness, and the need for reconciliation. Instead, he suffers from that most heinous of sins: pride in his own spiritual superiority and incorruptibility. Joshua's obstinate conviction of his own rectitude is one of the chief factors that leads to the open conflict between the two communities... (128-29)

Hence, instead of developing that Greek scriptural spirit that is considered one of the major ideals of the life of Christ, "forgiving those who would hurt you," Joshua becomes just the opposite. Conversely, Joshua can be viewed in the realm of the Christ presented in the Gospels, who chastises the money changers in the temple and the Sadducees and the Pharisees for their "strict adherence" to their version of the scriptures, and their non-acceptance of him as the long-prophesied "Messiah," foretold in the Hebrew scriptures. [7] However, Christ does chastise these Jews for something similar to Joshua's actions: they are all interpreting doctrine dogmatically and without a cultural understanding or appreciation for the transformation that will need to take

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[7]See Isaiah for details.

place in order for the community and the religion to survive. Joshua is immovable in his attitude toward the traditional Gikuyu community. After "preaching the Gospel" as taught to him by the missionaries at Siriana, Joshua is deeply disturbed when the people do not heed his warnings and turn from their 'wicked ways':

> But some went back to drinking; to dancing the tribal ritual; to circumcision. And Joshua day by day grew in wrath and vehemently condemned such behavior. Perhaps the word had not taken root. Joshua himself was strict and observed the word to the letter. Religious uniformity in his own home was binding. (34)

This vehement attitude toward religious uniformity will drive Joshua's daughter into an underground circumcision in the sense that she will literally have to run away from home in order to take part in the ritual. Again, is Ngugi arguing against the ritual of circumcision, or is his argument opposing those who would force young girls into a choice between the worlds they feel bound to by loyalty, love, religion, tradition, and family? This question remains unanswered in my mind. However, according to Tobe Levin,

> Ngugi's novel, in any case, deals with female circumcision not from a feminist, but from a humanist and progressive standpoint, leading its readers gently and ironically to understand that male insistence on female 'rites' is displaced

> impotence and is ultimately de-constructive. (210)[8]

I think it is true that Ngugi does not, in any manner, address this rite from a "feminist" perspective. But does Ngugi hint or even state that the rite was "displaced impotence" on the part of those males in the novel, or is he addressing another issue? As Chimalum Moses Nwankwo states in his "Dissertation", Women, Violence, and the Quest for Social Justice in the Works of Ngugi wa Thiongo:

> Forgiveness is the core of Christian conduct and belief, but Joshua does not forgive anyone, not even his daughter. Circumcision is the ultimate unforgivable sin, even though he and his wife were circumcised before their conversion. Joshua's prayers underline this un-Christian quality. (67-68)

Thus, Ngugi addresses the theme of the "Christian" ethic of Joshua in relation to his family and his community; he does not seem to question the legitimacy or the human rights associated with female circumcision. He shows that Joshua, in his desire to be everything a "good Christian" should be, comes instead to represent the reprehensible spirit of a "self-righteous" person. He is without compassion or understanding of his daughter's pain and confusion, and he does not attempt, in any way, to help her come to terms with her turmoil. Muthoni's desire is to be the best 'Gikuyu' woman in a 'Christian' world that she can be; however, she is forced

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[8]See "Women as Scapegoats of Culture and Cult: A Activist's View of Female Circumcision in Ngugi's The River Between, for details.

to make a choice, and she chooses (at least outwardly) the traditional ways. For Joshua, the act of female circumcision is the ultimate blasphemy:

> Joshua was against such initiation rites, especially the female circumcision, which was taking on a new significance in the relationship between Makuyu and Kameno. To Joshua, indulging in this ceremony was the unforgivable sin. Had he not been told to take up everything and leave Egypt?... In fact, Joshua believed circumcision to be so sinful that he devoted a prayer to asking God to forgive him for marrying a woman who had been circumcised. (35)

But Joshua must be questioned in this instance because he does not simply leave his personal "repentance" or his outrage against the rite as a prayer for his own forgiveness, nor will he tolerate this "blasphemous" act from anyone in the community. He becomes so incensed at the prospect of more initiation ceremonies that he actually prays to God for His wrath to come down upon the young people who will take part in the ritual. He states:

> O, God. Look at their preparations. O,
>
> God, why don't you descend on this wicked generation and finish their evil ways?... Bring down the fire and thunder, Bring down the flood. (37)

In his account of the Protestant missionaries, Philps presents what he refers to as "actual histories" of people who, like Joshua, had turned from their "wicked ways" and come to wholeheartedly and unquestioningly accept "The Word of God." He writes:

> I never thought that I would name the name of Jesus in any other than blasphemy, I who have called Him a European, and an Indian. But now Jesus is a Reality, and my Savior. I rejoice as I speak His name. God has preserved me from danger and death many times without number. Now I want to witness for Him alone. "I" bears the marks of sin still on his face, but the light of Jesus shows through all the sin marks, and how he witnesses! (36-7)

Like Joshua, this convert referred to as "I" hates his traditions. He refutes the tribal markings on his face, and he is a vehement "witness" for Christ. Joshua uses his prayer to ask God to destroy the enemy, (those who are now undergoing the same circumcision ceremony he and his wife had already participated in) rather than "praying for those who would despitefully use you" (St. Matthew 5:44) as the Greek scriptures declare. Again, is this Ngugi's indictment of Christianity, or just the brand of Christianity taught to the Gikuyu by the missionaries? Nwankwo believes that

> The treatment of Joshua in the novel suggests not the pacific and virtuous nature of the convert of a credible religion but a temperament that approaches neurosis and paranoia. He is a convert without the godliness of conversion. The common fears of man are with him always and these range from fear of the wrath of his erstwhile friends to fear of the punishment of his Christian God. (65-66)

Although I do not agree with Nwankwo in his assertion that Ngugi is using Joshua as a representative of a religion that is not "credible," I do agree that Joshua is the proverbial person who does not "practice what he preaches."

His adamant desire to follow Christ is overshadowed by his desire to be "holier than thou" at the expense of all those around him, especially his family. He is much like the man described by Nwankwo, most notably, a "convert without the godliness of conversion." His "transformation" thus, is not totally spiritual, but lends itself only to outward actions generated by a misunderstanding and misinterpretation of the life and actions of one who claims to be like Christ.

Joshua's most "un-Christian-like" behavior is shown in his treatment of his own daughters, Muthoni because she disobeys him and does not return home after he sends for her, and Nyambura because she is the bearer of the "bad" tidings. Joshua probably feels that his actions are not only correct, but also, according to Greek and Hebrew scriptures, they are "expected" by his religious community; but to the traditional community he is viewed as one who causes the wrath of the spirit and the ancestors to befall his own family by turning away from the ancestors to the Christian God. Again, like the character Okonkwo in Things Fall Apart, there is no room for compromise, even at the cost of his own family. There are others, including David Sandgren, who have studied the Christian influence on the people of Kenya and who have come to conclusions similar to Nwankwo's assertions.

In his discussion entitled Christianity and the Kikuyu, David Sandgren writes that

> Education and medicine were considered only a means to the desired end of

> Christian conversion. AIM (Africa Inland Mission) schools taught the fundamentals of education so that school attenders could read the Bible. AIM doctors conducted daily worship services among their patients, and led patients to believe that attendance of services was a prerequisite for treatment...(57) A theology of the whole person was not operative among the AIM; they were interested in African souls, not in the conduct of their minds or bodies. Emphasis on evangelism and conversion fostered great insensitivity to East African culture and society. (23)

According to Sandgren, then, the emphasis of this missionary organization (AIM) was to "save the souls" of the Africans without any regard for the mind, body, (or the communities' survival). There was no attempt to integrate tradition and Christianity; to the contrary, the Gikuyu are presented with ultimata--traditional ways or missionary ways. Joshua chooses the missionary teachings. It is Joshua's disregard for the total spiritual, emotional, and psychological being of his own daughter that will force Muthoni into her undercover circumcision, and her sister will have to bear the initial brunt of the wrath of Joshua.

After realizing that Muthoni is missing after an evening out, Joshua questions Nyambura about her sister's whereabouts. With fear, she reveals her sister's secret, and is quickly punished by her father. Her knowledge of Muthoni's intent makes her accountable for her sister's actions:

> 'I think she has gone to my aunt at Kameno."
> 'To do what?'

> There was no help for it. She looked at the door ready to run out as she gathered her courage to say the one ominous word--
> 'Circumcision'
> 'What!'
> 'To be circumcised.'
> Before she could run out Joshua was on her. He glared at her, shaking her all the time. He was almost mad and small foams of saliva could be seen at the sides of his mouth. (40-41)

This description of Joshua as an almost "rabid dog" with "foams of saliva" coming from his mouth is striking. He has, in his passion, lost control of his senses; he has taken on the characteristics of a "mad dog," and has decided that his remaining daughter must atone for the sins of the wayward Muthoni by becoming the principal object of his rage. He has become like an animal by allowing his fervor and zeal, rather than his intellect and compassion, to control his actions. Nwankwo views this deed as yet another in a long line of "un-Christian-like" conduct. He writes that

> Temperance is also a cardinal Christian virtue but none of it is ever reflected in Joshua. When Muthoni disappears and his other daughter, Nyambura, breaks the news that the disappearance is for circumcision, the irreligious fury of Joshua is quite interesting to watch. The newsbearer is regarded almost as much a culprit as the offender. (68)

Nyambura is, thus, the victim of her father's displaced anger. But his anger is not simply because Muthoni has disobeyed him. His major concern, instead, is how he will be viewed in the Christian community since his daughter has decided to take part in the ritual he has so adamantly fought against. His

concern is mainly for asserting his position as the leader of the converts in the missionary community, even if it means totally ostracizing his own daughter. Attempting to retrieve his daughter in his only known manner, by force, Joshua sends Nyambura to Kameno. However, Nyambura returns home with ominous news, and Joshua is, once again met with Muthoni's rejection of him and her insistence upon becoming a "genuine" woman:

> On the following day Nyambura brought the sad news that Muthoni had refused to return home. Joshua sat still as he listened to this. Already he felt ashamed for being caught last night by the devil, unawares. He had now prayed, asking for strength never to be caught again in slumber....From that day Muthoni ceased to exist for him, in his heart. She had brought an everlasting disgrace to him and his house, which he had meant to be an example of what a Christian home should grow into. All right. Let her go back to Egypt. (42)

Muthoni's desire to take part in the ritual is viewed as a sin and a disgrace by her father. The use of Egypt as a synonym for the world of sin is important. In the Bible (Exodus), Moses had literally to lead the Israelites from their bondage in Egypt after many battles with Pharaoh. Only a few of these people would, eventually, arrive in "The Promised Land." According to Exodus, after Moses led the Israelites from their bondage in Egypt, they became restless and filled with despair. Instead of honoring the God who had delivered them from their captivity, they built a golden calf to worship. In His anger, God speaks to Moses thus:

> And the Lord said unto Moses, Go, get thee down: For thy people, which thou hast brought out of the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves: They have turned aside quickly out of the way which I commanded them: they have made them a molten calf, and have worshipped it, and have sacrificed thereunto, and said, These be thy gods, O Israel, which have brought thee up out of Egypt. And the Lord said unto Moses, I have seen this people, and, behold, it is a stiffnecked people: Now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may wax hot against then: and I will make of thee a great nation. (32: 7-10)

Moses pleads with his God as the story continues, and God has mercy upon the children of Israel. Joshua, however, does not pray for mercy for his people; instead, he feels that they should be severely punished for their disobedience--for their return to the "idolatrous" ritual of circumcision. He feels that the missionaries have led him and his people away from their Egypt of ancestor worship and "pagan" rites such as circumcision. But those who will return to the rituals, (circumcision and the ceremonies that precede it) anyone who will look back at the sinful ways abandoned in 'Egypt,' Joshua feels that they will encounter only ultimate and complete destruction. The Biblical chapter of Jude also supports this assertion:

> I will therefore put you in remembrance, though ye once knew this, how the Lord, having saved the people out of the land of Egypt, afterward destroyed them that believed not. (5)

Thus, Ngugi presents the reader with a zealous Christian who does not completely live the life he purports, although he

firmly believes that cutting off his daughter by allowing her to "cease from existence" in his life, and letting her go "back to Egypt" will be restitution for his being caught "unawares" by "the devil." I believe that this is Ngugi's indictment, not of Christianity, but of individuals who manipulate a religious, political, or social institution or ideology to present ideas that will later be used to colonize the minds, bodies, and souls of the indigenous peoples; to further the political, social, financial, or even spiritual agenda of one group of individuals at the expense of another group of people. As noted at the beginning of this essay, Ngugi himself states that when he wrote this work he was "deeply Christian," but he later abandoned Christianity. This may explain his reasons for not totally indicting Christianity in this novel, while he blatantly attacks it in other novels like Weep Not, Child. This is a "prejudice" that Ngugi develops as a result of his personal experience with Christianity and the missionary communities in his own village.

The novel is, however, an indictment of those who would ostracize, humiliate, and disassociate one group of people from another in the name of any god. This is similar to the discussion of Christianity and colonization presented in Chinua Achebe's novels, Things Fall Apart and Arrow of God; it is an ideology that would indict all things traditional and "African"--all the things the people of the village believed

to be important and worthwhile. This brand of teaching would ultimately divide communities, families, and friends across religious and ideological rivers.

Yet, despite with all the rage of her father, threatened with familial ostracism, and with extreme division in the community, Muthoni still insists upon being circumcised. The ritual comes to symbolize much more than womanhood to her--it is also a symbol of tribal pride and loyalty to the ancestors. She can not understand why, if her parents are both circumcised, they can now fight against the rite:

> 'Father and mother are circumcised. Are they not Christians? 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. You learn the ways of the tribe. Yes, the white man's God does not quite satisfy me. I want, I need something more. My life and your life are here, in the hills, that you and I know.' (29-30)

Muthoni continues by voicing her belief that the man who is living at Siriana with all the women at the mission, must be married to those women, and that he, as a Gikuyu man, will 'surely not marry' a woman who is not circumcised. She is unable to reconcile within her spirit her father's new attitude toward the circumcision of women, nor can she comprehend a society in which women lived with men outside of marriage, or in a celibate manner (note her reaction to the women living with the male missionary at Siriana). Lloyd

Williams notes in the essay, "Religion and Life in James Ngugi's The River Between" that

> Muthoni knows that religion in and for itself is nothing. She says that she is a Christian. She does not wish to leave the faith. But she realises that her life is inseparably bound up in the ways and life of the tribe, and that Christianity cannot be meaningful to her if it attempts to meet her outside the tribe, outside of her life within the tribe. (147)

It is her desire to become like her father and mother that drives Muthoni to her final act of "betrayal" and desperation--her return to Kameno to have the rite performed with her age-group. This ceremony is of the utmost importance to the psychological development of Muthoni. Without it, her life has no real meaning within the Christian or Gikuyu world. Williams continues:

> James Ngugi, too, is aware that Christianity must encounter man where he is and lives, that it can be a meaningful faith only as it comes to man within the context of his life in the world. (147)

Thus, as earlier stated, Christianity in and of itself can not have total meaning for those like Muthoni; instead, it has to meet them in their own realm of understanding, or within the context of a lifestyle that they can appreciate. It can not totally obliterate the culture, traditions, and values that are of the utmost concern, and which represent the pride and individuality of the community. Instead, it has to bring those important pieces into a sphere of comprehension which

the inhabitants can accept without having to give up their total selves, their values, and their traditions. Rice adds:

> All knowledge is theoretical. What we see, what we understand is within the context of a frame of reference determined by our experiences which are invested with symbolic significance by the culture in which we live. Thus, for Muthoni, the nuns at Siriana are the missionary's wives; nor can she conceive of any 'tribe' that does not practice circumcision, for it is only through circumcision that "a girl can grow into womanhood." (128)

Muthoni does not live in a world in which women live celibate lives without men, marriage, or children. Similarly, after being socialized to believe that only girls who are circumcised would grow into full "womanhood" and become true parts of Gikuyu culture, she can not picture her life as a part of the "uncircumcision". Muthoni and her other age-mates are met with the new Christian doctrine that views this ritual as an abomination before God. But, as Rice notes, her world and her knowledge comes from within a traditional society and, at least initially, a traditional Gikuyu home. This ritual <u>is</u> the symbol of adulthood to her society and thus, she can not and will not allow her father's new found faith to destroy something she holds dear and describes as "oh so beautiful." As Jomo Kenyatta states,

> No proper Gikuyu would dream of marrying a girl who has not been circumcised, and vice versa. It is taboo for a Gikuyu man or woman to have sexual relations with someone who has not undergone this operation. If it happens, a man of a woman must go through a ceremonial

> purification, korutwo thahu or gotahikiomegiro--namely, ritual vomiting of the evil deed. (132)

Understanding this great "taboo" and not wanting to become a part of the community cut off from her heritage, wanting to marry a Gikuyu man and live a Gikuyu life, Muthoni not only feels that there is no other option for her, but she is also bound by love to the tradition.

With these feelings of duty in mind, Muthoni joins the other girls in the dancing ceremonies prior to the ritual. Her emotions as a sensual, sexual being about to join the adult world are expressed through her movements and songs:

> And then Muthoni appeared on the scene. The singing increased in volume and excitement. And she was a wonder. Where had she learnt this?... She danced, sang describing love; telling of relationships between a woman and a man; scenes and words of lovemaking. (49)

All spectators and participants wonder where Muthoni has gathered the strength and the conviction to take such a drastic step away from her family, and how she seems to know the words and the movements associated with the dance better than all the other participants. Tobe Levin notes that, "it is in light of her foremothers' independence that Muthoni's controversial decision, to submit to clitoridectomy, has been judged. One is tempted to censure her, but disapproval may be softened if her gesture is seen as an act of rebellion against her father's rigid code" (213). I do agree that Muthoni's act is a "rebellious" one, but I also believe that Ngugi presents

a young woman who not only feels the need to rebel against her hypocritical father, but also a teenager who is bound by love to her mother and her "foremothers" to continue their traditions. Ngugi even suggests that much of Muthoni's knowledge of the dance and the songs may have come from her own mother, Miriama. He writes of Miriama:

> Her faith and belief in God were coupled with her fear of Joshua. But that was religion and it was the way things were ordered. However, one could still tell by her eyes that this was a religion learnt and accepted; inside the true Gikuyu woman was sleeping. (39)

It is quite possible that this "sleeping" Gikuyu woman secretly taught the songs and dances to her daughter, and instills within her a pride for her heritage. Miriama has accepted the new religion out of a learned passivity and "fear" of her husband. But she is like her daughter inside; she desires for her true self to be revealed as a traditional Gikuyu woman. Muthoni sees and experienced the beauty of the dance with her mother's inherited and experienced spirit; but it is this part of the ceremony that Joshua and the other Christians find most reprehensible because they view the dances as "sexually suggestive." Nwankwo writes

> The ultimate humiliation for Joshua is the running away of Muthoni. The sexually suggestive description of her ritual dance is something for people to think about. The dance enables the reader to relate the girl's decision properly to the disgusting bigotry responsible for it. Joshua, in fiction or reality, would definitely not bear to see or hear he daughter "jumping and

> swinging her hips from side to side" (p.40) in public. (70)

Although I feel that the words "disgusting bigotry" are a bit harsh for descriptions of Joshua's actions, and I would probably feel more comfortable with him being characterized as a "misguided" figure who blindly follows in the footsteps of the missionary leaders, I do agree with Nwankwo that the imagery and the sensuality of the dance are important. As Williams notes:

> In the character of Joshua, Ngugi portrays the religious law given, the man who accepts without question the religion handed down to him by those he considers his superiors, the man who feels it is his duty to impose the acceptance of the same religion on those under his control... (152)

Thus, to the misguided Joshua, anything viewed as sexually suggestive is yet another affront to his Christian morality, and Muthoni became his symbolic ram for sacrifice and slaughter. As earlier stated, Muthoni feels that this part of the ritual is most enjoyable and she expresses her feelings of changing from a 'girl' into a 'woman' in a manner that captivates all those around her. However, Muthoni's erotic enjoyment will last only a brief moment--she will pay a high price for her initiation.

After the dancing ends and Muthoni is circumcised, the book takes a dramatic turn. Instead of properly recuperating like the other girls of her age-group, her wound becomes infected and even seems to "expand." This is an allegorical

comment on the "expansion" of the issue of female circumcision to mythic proportions in the communities of Kameno and Makuyu. It is as if the wound is speaking for itself--it is crying out for all to hear of the injustice and assault on the mind, body, and spirit of young Muthoni. Gadamer asserts that

> All mythical consciousness is still knowledge, and if it knows about divine powers, then it has progressed beyond mere trembling before power...but also beyond a collective life contained in magic rituals...It knows about itself, and in this knowledge it is no longer simply outside itself. (274)

The wound is now empowered because it is expanding beyond the understanding of the original circumstance. It is mythic in its use in furthering the ideologies of both the Christians and the people who choose to worship and live by the rules of the ancestors. Ngugi continues:

> As days went by, Muthoni became worse. Waiyaki, who was a frequent visitor, grew more troubled. Muthoni was wasting away so fast. Now only her eyes seemed to have any life. Something had to be done. He was now convinced that the herbs which the aunt gave to Muthoni would not cure her. (58)

It becomes apparent that Muthoni will not survive the surgery--the wound will envelope her, and it will exist, not "outside" the community, but as an ever-present reminder of the struggle. This raises another important issue: why does the author allow Muthoni to die? Is it a continued indictment of the missionary-type Christianity and dogma practiced in Gikuyu land?

Ngugi's presentation of Joshua's "Christian" ethic leaves the reader with little doubt that he does not support this harsh brand of 'Christian' teaching. Cook notes

> The novel clearly deplores the rigid, doctrinaire rejection by hard line Christians of all traditional beliefs and values. Joshua's evangelical work is essentially dehumanizing and mechanical. he is subservient to ideas which he makes no claim to have mastered(:). (31)

Ngugi was writing out of a difficult context at best. Being reared in a "Christian" community with "Christian" values, yet, in the long run, forsaking his "Christian" name and even the language of the colonizer for the Gikuyu language, this conflict is understandable and even expected. (7)

7. Ngugi adamantly opposes the use of any "foreign" language in the production of African literature, and has written several works, including Decolonizing the Mind as representative essays of his thoughts on this matter.

The Christianity that Ngugi approves of at this time is one that has to meet him at the most "African" level of his being. He, thus, presents a community that desires to remain true to its uniqueness, its' "Africanness," without giving all to the colonizer. But Ngugi will, later in life, question his own belief in a Christian God, and abandon the religion of his childhood. However, Ngugi's view of female circumcision seems to remain unclear.

One may deduce that Ngugi views female circumcision in a negative manner because of the death of Muthoni. But

considering the fact that all of the other girls who participated in the ritual survive and thrive, and are viewed as healthy after their wounds begin to heal, this is not such an obvious appraisal. So why, then, is Muthoni allowed to die? In his discussion of the work, Robson notes that:

> Muthoni's death sparks off in the ridges the sort of conflict going on in Waiyaki's mind. The event is interpreted differently by different sides... The reaction of the Siriana Mission to Muthoni's death is to regard it as a punishment for the perpetuation of such a brutal ritual... Muthoni's death also has an effect which carries over in to the remainder of the novel giving her a role as a martyr to the tribe. (11)

As Robson continues, he recalls a radio conversation between Ngugi and Robert Serumagu, in which Ngugi remarked that the person who becomes a martyr "is not the loser." Ngugi believes that once a person become a martyr (he mentions Christ and Peter) those who are left behind to carry on their mission become even more adamant in their desire to fulfill the goals of their deceased mentor. This is what Muthoni's death meant to Ngugi (Robson), and from this, I feel safe in saying that Ngugi does not, in any manner, use Muthoni's death as a way to speak literally against the circumcision of girls. Ngugi seems, to the contrary, to mythologize Muthoni and her circumstance:

> Within a few weeks the name of Muthoni was a legend. Stories grew up around her name. Some people said that she had not actually died of the wound, but that she had been poisoned by the missionaries.

> Indeed, one of the boys who had taken her there had seen this. (67)

In her death and martyrdom, Muthoni embodies all the beauty, love, and dedication to her community which Ngugi discusses, and which Kenyatta describes in his work. Ngugi's indictment is of the systems that would have Muthoni choose; but Muthoni never really chooses. Even on her deathbed, she says to her sister:

> 'I am still a Christian, see, a Christian in the tribe. I am a woman and will grow big and healthy in the tribe'... 'Waiyaki,' she turned to him, 'tell Nyambura I see Jesus. And I am a woman, beautiful in the tribe(...)" She had died clinging to that image, to that obsession which had led her from Makuyu to Kameno. (61)

This "obsession" is to try to remain a Christian, to see Jesus, but also to be a "beautiful woman" in the tribe. Rice adds that

> ...Muthoni dies triumphant, proclaiming her victory, unaware that she is an ironic symbol of the ambiguous future that awaits the tribe. If it can adapt to change without losing its identity, if it can make sacrifices, there is always the hope that the tribe will be able to rejuvenate and regenerate its spiritual core and thereby ensure its survival, by fusing what is best in Christianity and the white man's culture; if not, it will be torn apart by internal dissension, and will disintegrate and die. (130)

In her "triumphant" death, Muthoni's actions will further divide the community on an issue mentioned earlier: mission school education.

Thus, Ngugi presents the portrait of traditional Gikuyu life, interrupted and forever altered after the arrival of the white men and the Christian missionaries. His indictment is not of the ritual of circumcision; to the contrary, it is of the convictions of a "Christian" community that will use its beliefs and dogmatic convictions to divide and conquer from within. It is a critique of the prejudice that comes without the knowledge or recognition of what Gadamer calls fore-thought, and it is a prejudice without a desire to understand the live and situations of the "others." Muthoni will lose her family as a result of the strict teachings of the missionary community. This community, represented most adamantly by Joshua, will utilize Christian doctrine as a colonizing agent, and eventually, with the unbending pride of the people, cause the communities to remain perpetually and irrevocably divided along spiritual, literal, and ideological lines.

CHAPTER THREE
BRIDGING THE GAP WITH TASHI
ALICE WALKER AND THE "WHOLE STORY" OF FEMALE CIRCUMCISION IN POSSESSING THE SECRET OF JOY

> We grasp the meaning and structure of a literary work only through its relation to archetypes which are themselves abstracted from a long series of texts which they are, so to speak, the invariants. These archetypes... encode the uses of that "secondary language" (Lotman) which we call 'literature.' The literary works relation to these archetypal models is always one of realization, transformation, or transgression. (34, Laurent Jenny, "The strategy of form.")

In order to understand the "meaning and structure" of any work, we must first understand its relation to the "archetypes" from which it emerges. This Dissertation thus far has investigated the works of Flora Nwapa and Ngugi wa Thiongo, and their presentations and representations of the issue of female circumcision. As noted in the "Introduction" to this work, only after reading Alice Walker's novel, Possessing The Secret of Joy, did I feel that the whole stories of Ngugi's Muthoni and Nwapa's Efuru had been told. What seems to be most obviously missing from Ngugi's and Nwapa's portrayals is the deep and severe physical, emotional and psychological anguish experienced by women who undergo the circumcision operation/ritual. Walker "transforms" Nwapa's Efuru and Ngugi's Muthoni in her work into the deeply disturbed and emotionally scarred figure of Tashi. Walker's work, then, is not merely a 'reproduction' of Ngugi's and Nwapa's ideas, but it is a re-analysis and re-development of

the concept of woman as the ultimate sacrifice for culture, and the detrimental effects this sacrifice has on the community of women as a whole.

Walker's novel tells the horrific story of the physical, emotional, and psychological journey into terror of Tashi, a young Olinkan girl, who is literally and figuratively destroyed by her initiation by pharonic circumcision into the fictive community. Her operation could, at best, be described as what Asma El Dareer calls a "tight infibulation," in the work discussed in the previous chapters. [9]

Walker's presentation of Tashi's circumcision and its' aftermath are central in the novel. The quest for Tashi's individual justice seems to take a back seat in a brief section about the theories surrounding the intentional spread of AIDS in Black Africa. However, returning to the destructive repercussion of female circumcision, Walker writes an account that could be the narrative of any of the women and families whose lives have been forever and irrevocably traumatized after a female member is circumcised. Notably, many of the women in the studies written by Olayinka Koso-Thomas, Asma El Dareer, and Hanny Lightfoot-Klein have noted similar physical

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[9]See Asma El Dareer's work, Woman, Why Do You Weep? Female Circumcision and Its' Consequences, for details. See list of Works Cited for bibliographic information.

and mental manifestations of pain, suffering, and humiliation as Tashi after they are circumcised. [10]

It is obvious from Walker's deeply disturbing interpretation of the tradition that, because the ritual has such overwhelmingly damaging effects on women, she believes that the eradication of female circumcision is the only resolution to the physical, emotional, and psychological problems that face women like her fictional Tashi. And although Tashi is traumatically scarred, both physically and emotionally by the ritual itself, her scar and suffering transform her in the end to one who truly knows what is "the Secret of Joy." This idea of transforming woman by her scars is one that Walker has utilized before in her writing. For example, in her essay, "Curative Domains: Women, Healing and History in Black Woman's Narratives," Professor Athena Vrettos writes that

> Throughout In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," Walker envisions herself in the role of healer; like Rebecca she creates a world out of her ancestral scars. By reclaiming the history of black women, those "creatures so mutilated in body, so dimmed and confused by pain," and redefining their scars as "the springs of

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[10]See the "Introduction" of this work, section entitled "Women and Tradition," for details.

> creativity for which there was no release," Walker embodies the healer's ability to forge spiritual bonds with the past. (455-56)

Walker's role is similar in Possessing the Secret of Joy. She takes on the character of 'healer/savior' of the women whose bodies have been mutilated, and whose spirits have been destroyed by female circumcision. She redefines Tashi's scars in the end because although Tashi has experienced a horror worse than death, she triumphs, even in her own death, by taking control of her life and giving meaning to her suffering.

Walker's presentation is not, however, unproblematic. It seems to me that she presents the character of the tsunga (Walker's word)/circumcisor in such a horrific manner that it is almost impossible for anyone to feel any sympathy for her, even though she (the circumcisor) had also to undergo a horrible and painful circumcision. And it is also problematic to me that she seems to move away, in this work, from the realm she defines as "womanist" to an ideology that is more profoundly "feminist" in her presentation of Tashi's dilemma. These issues will be discussed further in this analysis. However, returning to the novel, Tashi's experiences articulate various dilemmas which are not vocalized by the characters of Muthoni and Efuru, but Walker's presentation is,

without question, connected to her predecessors. But Jenny continues by stating that

> The term intertextuality designates this transposition of one or more systems into another, but since it has often been understood in the banal sense of 'source criticism' of a text we prefer the term transposition, which has the advantage of indicating that the passage from one signifying system to another requires a new articulation of the thetic--of enuciative and denotative positionality. (39, Jenny's emphasis)

It is not my attempt, then, as one who reads "intertextually" to present Walker's work as just another segment of the 'ur' or 'original' texts, but I must acknowledge the individuality of reflection and 'positionality' in her analysis. Walker's document "transposes" the earlier ideas of Nwapa and Ngugi, not by merely repeating their ideas, but by bringing her own beliefs and further investigations of ritual into the conversation. To Walker, female circumcision is the utmost imposition of patriarchy, and she leaves the reader with no doubt of her personal reasons for writing and publishing the novel. In her latest work, a book which documents the details of a film she has produced with the help of director Pratibha Parmar, about female circumcision, Warrior Marks: Female Genital Mutilation and the Sexual Blinding of Women, Walker writes that

> I wrote my novel (Possessing the Secret of Joy) as a duty to my conscience as an educated African-AmerIndian woman. To write a book such as this, about a woman such as Tashi, about a subject such as genital mutilation, is in fact, as far as

> I am concerned, the reason for my education. Writing it worked my every nerve, as we say in African-American culture about those areas of struggle that pull from us every ounce of creative energy and pull every last shred of illusion. I know only one thing about the "success" of my effort. I believe with all my heart that there is at least one baby girl born on the planet today who will not know the pain of genital mutilation because of my work. And that in this one instance, at least, the pen will prove mightier that the circumcisor's knife. (25)

It is apparent from this quotation that the novel was written with this goal in mind: to assist in the argument for the eradication of female circumcision. As she notes, her "success" depends solely on her ability to keep at least one female child from experiencing the trauma of circumcision. She wants, then, to eliminate the practice, by erasing the pain of one small girl at a time. This does not seem, in any way, to be the purpose of the discussions of Ngugi nor Nwapa.

Walker's discussion of female circumcision, then, as well as her 'reason' for publication of the novel, is vastly dissimilar from the portrayals discussed previously by Ngugi and Nwapa. Although both of those works are filled with ambiguous sentiments regarding the issue, at no time does Ngugi nor Nwapa blatantly attack the tradition, nor do they criticize the people who participate or perform the ceremonies. Walker does however, from cover to cover of Possessing the Secret of Joy, attack, deconstruct, and indict female circumcision and its cultural significance within the

fictional Olinkan African community. Even in Warrior Marks, Walker does not seem willing to address some of the complex social and cultural issues that pertain to many discussions of female circumcision because, I think, in her analysis, there is no cultural, religious, or social argument strong enough to support the continuation of a ritual that does so much physical, spiritual, and mental harm to women.

However, in Warrior Marks, Walker's co-author, Pratibha Parmar, addresses the issue of what she calls a "culturally imperialistic" view of female circumcision as follows:

> The fear of being labeled cultural imperialists and racists has made many women reluctant to say or do anything about female genital mutilation. Except for the writings and voices of a handful of white feminists over the last decade or so, there has been a deafening silence, a refusal to engage either critically or actively with this taboo area of feminist concern. Clearly, female genital mutilation is a painful, complex, and difficult issue, which involves questions of cultural and national identities, sexual, human rights, and the rights of women and girls to live safely and healthy. But this complexity is not an excuse to sit by and do nothing... This reluctance to interfere with other cultures leaves African children at risk of mutilation. If we do not speak out, we collude in the perpetuation of this violence. (94-95, Parmar's emphasis)

First of all, I must note that a vast number of African women whom I have quoted in this study, who have themselves experienced female circumcision, including Nawal El Sadaawi, Asma El Dareer, and Awa Thiam, have written works which have

discussed the "horrors" of female circumcision. Thus, Parmar's assertion here that only a "handful of white feminists" have addressed the issue in the past decade is simply inaccurate. Nevertheless, in her analysis of female circumcision, Parmar confronts the issue of the difficulty associated with "interfering" with cultural traditions, and she does acknowledge that the issue is a sensitive one that involves "questions of cultural and national identities," as well as other matters. Although this paper cannot attempt to answer all of the philosophical, moral, and social issues connected with the ritual of female circumcision, it can investigate the vastly different, though intertextually connected, presentation of ritual by Walker, as well as confronting some of the problems associated with her explication of female circumcision and the circumcisors.

Walker also seems, in this instance, to deviate from the world and the lives of women whom she refers to and defines as "womanists." In the volume of essays entitled In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens, Walker defines a "womanist" as follows:

> A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, "You acting womanish," i.e., like a woman... A woman who loves other women, sexually and or nonsexually... Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. (xi)

A "womanist," then, is unlike a "feminist" in her commitment to the "wholeness of entire people." Also, in a recent essay

which discusses and defines the term "womanism", "Womanism: The Dynamics of the Contemporary Black Female Novel," Chikweyne Okonjo Ogunyemi writes

> Black womanism is a philosophy that celebrates black roots, the ideals of black life, while giving a balanced presentation of black womandom. It concerns itself as much with the black sexual power tussle as with the world power structures that subjugate blacks. Its ideal is for black unity where every black person has a modicum of power and so can be a "brother" or a "sister" or a "father" or a "mother" to the other. This philosophy has a mandalic core: its aim is the dynamism of the wholeness and self-healing that one sees in the positive, integrative endings of womanist novels. (240)

Walker seems to deviate from this, and her own definition of a "womanist" ideology in her interpretation of Tashi's circumstances. It could be, however, that because Tashi experienced severe physical and health problems as a result of her operation, Walker does remain true to this womanist ideology, as she does state that a womanist may be a separatist for "health" reasons. It could also be that Walker's ideas about "womanism" are still evolving, and that she has come to see that even a "womanist," must at times, forsake the needs of society in general for the greater needs of womankind in particular. This deviation could also be representative of Walker's own ambiguity in thought and ideology about the "feminist" movement.

In one essay from <u>In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens</u> entitled "One Child of One's Own," Walker articulates some of

the problems associated with the "white feminist" movement, but she intimates also that the "real" feminists are those who are not "racists." She is critical of "white feminists," but if her assertions are accurate, is there really a need for "womanism" in her mind?

> Our mother understood that in America white women who are truly feminist--for whom racism is inherently an impossibility--are largely outnumbered by **average** American white women for whom racism...is an accepted way of life... What was required of women of color was to learn to distinguish between who was the real feminist and who was not, and to exert energy in feminist collaborations only when there is little risk of wasting it. The rigors of this discernment will inevitably keep throwing women of color back upon themselves, where there is, indeed, so much work, of a feminist nature, to be done. From the stopping of clitoridectomy and "female circumcision" in large parts of Arabia and Africa to the heating of freezing urban tenements in which poor mothers and children are trapped alone to freeze to death. (379)

This ambiguity in Walker's work is difficult for me because I adhere to the "womanist" ideology Walker defines in the "Introduction" to the aforementioned volume of essays, as well as Ogunyemi's supplementary interpretation of the term. But why is there a need for this "womanist" ideology if the "true feminists" are not racists?, and if they are not racist, they must and will, therefore, address the needs of all women?

Perhaps this confrontation with female circumcision and between feminism/womanism is an example of what Walker refers to in the novel as the "bluntness" of the African American

woman, and not merely a thinly veiled feminism. Walker notes in the novel that this is one of the things that Tashi says she does "not like" about African American women:

> I was reminded of a quality in African-American women that I did not like at all. A bluntness. A going to the heart of the matter even if it gave everyone concerned a heart attack. Rarely did black women in America exhibit the subtlety of the African woman. (117)

By going to the "heart of the matter" of female circumcision, Walker does put the very difficult issue in the public view. Is Walker here, then, deconstructing herself as an "African Ameri-Indian woman" by acknowledging the difficulty faced by many women like her who feel that they must, regardless of the consequences, say what they feel? Some of these queries that will be analyzed in this work, like why the presentation of Tashi seems grounded in a "feminist," and not a "womanist" conviction, which, I think, dramatically alters Walker's presentation of the ritual because it removes Tashi from the all-important "African" communal and spiritual heritage into a Western and feminist ideology that is based on the survival and significance of individuality. Unlike Ngugi and Nwapa, who seem concerned with the maintenance of societal norms and traditions, Walker is, to the contrary, only interested in the preservation of the souls of the women who live in traditional communities.

It is with this conviction to end circumcision that Walker begins her discussion of Tashi with Tashi's own view of

herself as thus: "I did not realize for a long time that I was dead" (3). Coming from the mouth of a woman who is, at least literally, alive at the time of this statement, this idea of Tashi viewing herself as "dead" is pivotal. Before the circumcision and death of her sister Dura from her own circumcision, Tashi is described as a creative, imaginative and "complete" person. Her childhood friend and love, Adam, who will later become her husband, describes Tashi as follows: "The Tashi I remembered was always laughing and making up stories, or flitting cheerfully about the place on errands for her mother" (14). Olivia's memory of Tashi is also of a wonderfully cheerful, and even "impish" person. She will later lament on the loss of this Tashi:

> It was heartbreaking to see, on their return, how passive Tashi had become. No longer cheerful, or impish. Her movements, which had always been graceful, and quick with the liveliness of her personality, now became merely graceful. Slow. Studied. This was true even of her smile; which she never seemed to offer you without considering it first. (65)

This is the vision that Olivia and Adam had of Tashi, once alive, now figuratively dead. She was lively and graceful and quick; now she merely exists. It is interesting that although Olivia remembers this Tashi, who is always creating stories and imaginative lies to tell her mother about why things did not happen in the manner in which they should have, she also recalls that her first encounter with Tashi found the small child in tears:

> I remember, as if it were yesterday, my first glimpse of her. She was weeping, and the tears made a track through the dust on her face... Tashi was standing behind Catherine, her mother, a small, sway backed woman with an obdurate expression on her dark, lived face, and at first there was only Tashi's hand--a small dark hand and arm, like that of a monkey, reaching around her mother's lower body and clutching at her long, hibiscus-colored skirts. Then, as we drew nearer, my father and mother and Adam and myself, more of her became visible as she peeked around her mother's body to stare at us. (6-7)

Why are the first recollections of Tashi by Olivia and Adam so drastically different? They have both recorded the memory of their initial encounter with Tashi in their minds. Do their differing memories establish an early opposition between the visions of women and men in the work? Why is it important to note this difference? What is the importance of this, and other issues in Walker's writing, and the writings of other black women? I would like here to take a few minutes to gain a further understanding into some of the "meta-meanings" of Walker's writing in particular, and black women's writings, in general.

In an attempt to comprehend some of the "meta-meanings" of the writing of African American women, Missy Dean Kubitscheck states in her work, Claiming the Heritage: African American Women Novelist and History, that the African American woman writer

> explores novels that posit the fundamental necessity of knowing and coming to terms with tribal history to

> construct tenable black female identities. This theme appears in dual form: first, the characters' relationships to the history of blacks in the new world and, second, the author's relationships to the literary traditions on the literal level. African American women's work consistently assert the necessity of intellectually and emotionally understanding tribal historical experience to become and remain a fully functional black woman. On the meta-level, they document the linked strategies of persistence by which African American women writers have communicated, written, and published. (7-8)

It is this "literal" level that Kubitscheck describes that is important to this discussion. Kubitscheck also notes earlier in her work that black women's writing "seeks to document a recurrent theme, the interplay of history and developing female identities, enlivened by individual improvisation" (7). There can be no doubt that Walker presents Tashi as one who does, in her desire to participate in the circumcision ritual, attempt to understand her own "tribal historical experience" on the literal level. How can she become a true Olinkan woman, remaining loyal to her heritage, without holding on to the one thing that she felt within herself would make her uniquely "African?" Walker presents this "recurrent theme" throughout her work. However, she does deconstruct this "necessity" of understanding that experience of circumcision by articulating that no perception of the ritual can legitimize the reality of pain and suffering faced daily by the women who are the "participants" in this tradition. But there is a direct and

definitive connections between Tashi's history and her developing identity. She does not know who she can be out of the realm of tradition. There is no other reality for Tashi until she comes to the United States to "see" other women in order to know what is supposed to be "down there" between her legs. Tashi states:

> It was only after I came to American, I said, that I even knew what was supposed to be down there.
> Down there?
> Yes, my own body was a mystery to me, as was the female body, beyond the function of the breasts, to almost everyone I knew. (119)

Here, then, Walker shifts Tashi from defender and supporter of tribal practice, like the characters presented by Ngugi and Nwapa, to one who is extremely critical of and hostile to tradition. Tashi cannot even recall a picture of herself and her vagina as it was (and should have remained) before the operation. What she has lost can never be replaced. It is important to note that although Walker's interpretation and presentation of ritual is so dramatically different from Ngugi's and Nwapa's, there is no doubt that there is a connection between Walker's work and the Efuru and The River Between. Jenny continues by stating that

> Every poet is said to suffer from a veritable Oedipal complex of the creator, which leads him to modify the models to which he is sensitive by a variety of figures. Sometimes the "follower" will prolong the work of his precursor while deflecting it towards the point which it should have attained (Clinamen), sometimes the intention is to create that

> fragment which will make it possible to consider the precursor's work as a new whole (Tessera), sometimes there is an effort to break radically with the 'father' (Kenosis), or to purge oneself of the imaginative heritage one has in common with him (Askesis), or to create an oevre which will paradoxically seem to be the source and not the result of the preceding work (Apophrades). (36)

Walker not only, then, 'transforms' Tashi from Efuru and Muthoni; more importantly, she is able to recreate Tashi and the female circumcision experience in every way Jenny describes above. First of all, as the "follower," Walker takes Tashi to the point that Efuru and Muthoni most probably "should have attained" in their own experiences with female circumcision: the point of outrage which is most acutely voiced by Tashi's spiritual and emotional suffering. But Walker also make her work a "new whole" because neither of the preceding discussions detail, in any manner, the severe physical and psychological consequences of the ritual. Then, in this effort, she does literally break with 'mother and father' and 'purge' herself of that creative connection with those who write about the tradition much earlier than herself by elaborating on and deconstructing the ritual. Finally, it does seem, at times, that Walker's work could be considered the "source" text rather than the "result" of other works for the mere fact that it is her work that confronts almost all of the major physical and psychological problems associated with any discussion of female circumcision. So although the intertextual relationship does exist, Walker's novel most

apparently articulates, in depth, issues that neither Nwapa nor Ngugi discuss in their presentations.

Before the picture of Tashi as a devastated and destroyed individual becomes so apparent, Walker describes Tashi as a defiant one, like Ngugi's Muthoni, and like the Gikuyu described by Jomo Kenyatta. In the following passage, Kenyatta articulates the importance of circumcision to the history of the Gikuyu people of Kenya in his work, Facing Mount Kenya:

> The history and legends of the people are explained and remembered according to the names given to various age-groups at the time of the initiation ceremony... Historical events are recorded and remembered in this same manner. Without this custom a tribe which had no written records would not have been able to keep a record of important events and happenings in the life of the Gikuyu nation. (134-35)

It is quite possible that Kenyatta exaggerated his concern for the continuation of female circumcision based on the need for an event or circumstance that would record the Gikuyu history orally. But when Kenyatta continues, he notes most importantly, though, that those in the tribe teach their children, and are taught themselves, that to be an uncircumcised woman is to be outside of the tradition and the heritage that made one uniquely Gikuyu. Tashi voices a similar sentiment throughout the novel:

> Olivia begged me not to go. But she did not understand. All I care about now is the struggle for our people, I said. You are a foreigner. Any day you like, you

> and your family can ship yourselves back home... Who are you and your people never to accept us as we are? Never to imitate any of our ways? It is always we who have to change. I spat on the ground. It was an expression of contempt only very old Olinkans had known how to use to the full effect... I dug my heels into the flanks of the donkey and we trotted to the encampment... We had been stripped of everything but our black skins. Here and there a defiant cheek bore the mark of our withered tribe. These marks gave me courage. I wanted such a mark for myself. (21-24)

Walker's analysis of Tashi here is as a devout member of a dying African tribe. Like Kenyatta, who could see the impact of the missionaries on traditional tribal life, and the alteration of ideology in his community, and who held on for "dear life" to this one "African" tradition, Tashi posits herself similarly. There is no room for discussion or debate in her young mind--no consideration for the pain, suffering, and long-term consequences of the operation. The concern is only for the here and now--the preservation of the Olinkan way of life. Like Ngugi's Muthoni, she is rebellious and dedicated to herself and her world. But unlike Muthoni, she will later turn on herself and her world after the tsunga, M'Lissa, will end all hope for her to have a normal sensual, sexual, physical, or psychological life. Muthoni remains defiant whereas Tashi becomes almost totally passive, until her journey back to Africa. This representation of Tashi is continually marked with a harshly critical posture for the tradition of female circumcision.

As the novel progresses, the Tashi described and defined, the "dead" Tashi, will emerge as one totally separate from her community after the terrible surgery. Altered after an unspeakable suffering, she will literally becomes a "shell" of a person, and Walker presents no hope for those who, like Tashi, attempt to remain true to their cultural and their tribal identities. Their worlds must be turned completely and irrevocably upside down and inside out.

Many circumcised women do encounter similar manifestations of physical and psychological pain as Tashi. Some of the women who wrote histories of their own circumcisions articulate much of Tashi's grief, and feelings of guilt and shame as well. For example, Nawal El Sadaawi writes:

> The memory of circumcision continued to track me down like a nightmare. I had a feeling of insecurity, of the unknown waiting for me at every step I took into the future. I did not even know if there were new surprises being stored up for me by my mother and father, or my grandmother, or the people around me. Society had made me feel, since the day that I opened my eyes on life, that I was a girl, and that the word Bint (girl) when pronounced by anyone is almost always accompanied by a frown. (8-9, The Three Faces of Eve)

Tashi's reaction to her own circumcision is similar to Sadaawi's. It is, of course, notable that Sadaawi did not know what was being done to her, whereas Tashi "volunteered" for her operation. Even so, their young impressionable minds are forever altered by the operation. But unlike Sadaawi, who has

become a crusader in the fight to end female circumcision, Tashi loses touch with reality. Her once imaginative mind becomes an escape from her madness because she is irrevocably lost in a world of sorrow and distress. She cannot, at this point, crusade for anything except her own personal sanity. And though Tashi and Saadawi recount their experiences with circumcision in a terrifying manner, there are others who maintain, for one reason or another, that their experiences with circumcision are somehow "positive." Saadawi recounts her conversation with one woman as follows:

> 'I did not know anything about the operation at the time, except that it was very simple, and that it was done to all girls for the purposes of cleanliness, purity, and the preservation of a good reputation. It was said that a girl who did not undergo this operation was liable to be talked about by people, her behavior would become bad, and she would start running after men...'
> 'Did you believe what was said to you?'
> 'Of course I did. I was happy the day I recovered from the effects of the operation, and felt as though I was rid of something which had to be removed, and so had become clean and pure.' (34-35)

Even more articulate about her "positive" feelings regarding her own excision is a woman from Mali in Awa Thiam's discussion, Speak Out, Black Sisters. She is a divorcee who states that she is "glad" that she "had the excision operation," because since her divorce, she has not felt the need or desire to "run after a man" (66). One may argue, though, that this woman did not feel this "need" because a major part of her sexual organs were gone, and hence, her lack

of "necessity" is not really based on her desire to be without a man, but it is the result of a loss that occurred early in her life, over which she had no control. It is the voices of the women who, for one reason or another, believe that their surgeries have been beneficial to them, that are not voiced in Walker's discussion of ritual. Why does Walker not discuss these women's point of view? Is it simply that she believes that these women really have no understanding of what they have lost? This may very well be the case. For example, in Warrior Marks, Walker notes of her encounter with one African woman:

> I had to stop writing yesterday because I couldn't bear it. The enormity of what they've lost (had taken, by force, from them) will not be clear to these girls until much later in life. For most, it will never be clear. I'd asked "big Mary" about sexual pleasure. You know, I said, that the removal of sexual organs lessens sexual response and destroys or severely diminishes a woman's enjoyment. Well, she replied, my sex life is perfectly satisfactory, thank you very much! (How would you know, though, I thought.) I said a heartfelt Good for you!, slapped her palm, and let it go. (44)

It is apparent here that Walker is aware of the loss that has occurred in the lives of women like "big Mary," and women like Tashi who only realize (if they ever do) that some great part of their female person has been removed without their permission or, sometimes, even their knowledge. There is a deep feeling of empathy and sorrow articulated by Walker because she seems to feel that these women have no real

understanding of the significance of the part of their body that has been so violently eliminated. The importance of the loss of this organ of pleasure is immense. Notably, in her essay, "Critical Clitoridectomy: Female Sexual Imagery and Feminist Psychoanalytic Theory," Paula Bennett discusses clitoral imagery and the "loss" of the clitoris as thus:

> of all human organs, female and male, the clitoris is uniquely adapted to a sexual mission, being better supplied with nerve endings proportionate to its size than any other human body part, the penis included. Pleasure, moreover, is its only object. Quite unlike the penis... the clitoris has no reason beyond pleasure for being. This being the case, the clitoris's presence or absence in theoretical treatments of female sexuality... is of no small consequence to women. As Spivak has argued, "The pre-comprehended suppression or effacement of the clitoris relates to every move to define woman as sex object, or as a means of reproduction..." (181) Investigating the clitoris's effacement is therefore a passage into understanding the historical and theoretical suppression of women... (118-19)

And if Bennett is accurate in her assertion that the function of the clitoris is only "pleasure," how can women like 'big Mary" who no longer have a clitoris possibly enjoy sex? Of course sex is thought to be much more than just a physical manifestation of pleasure, yet it is most probable that clitorized women have little or no sensations of carnal enjoyment during intercourse due to their operations. And it is most especially probable that infibulated women cannot

enjoy intercourse in any manner because of the infibulation (sewing up) part of the surgery. [11]

But this lack of physical, sexual enjoyment is not the main issue of Tashi's life. One of the concerns of Walker's analysis is Tashi's interpretation of the events that lead to her sister, Dura's, painful and untimely death. It is shortly after this death that Tashi is met by the missionaries and their children, Adam and Olivia. Tashi comments on Dura as follows:

> They were always saying 'You mustn't cry! (Walker's emphasis) These are new people coming to live among us, and to meet them in tears is to bring bad luck to us. They'll think that we beat you! Yes, we understand your sister is dead ... It was a nightmare. Suddenly it was not acceptable to speak of my sister. Or to cry for her ... How small I felt, especially since Dura was no longer around to measure myself against. Not there to tease me that I had grown perhaps the thickness of a coin but still had not caught up with her ... And there was my mother, trudging along the path in front of me ... Tashi, she would say, it is only hard work that fills the emptiness. (15-16)

Here, Walker is articulating a fact that has become so well known in the fight to eradicate female circumcision--the many unexpected and untimely deaths, and subsequent "cover ups" of the circumstances surrounding the demises of young girls after

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[11]Hanny Lightfoot-Klein does note that women from the Sudan, however, a region known for its' use of infibulation, assert that they have enjoyable sex lives, for the most part. See "The sexual Experience and Marital Adjustment of Genitally Circumcised and Infibulated Females in the Sudan," for further information.

these operations. These young women become like "unmentionable" people--their deaths a punishment from a god, or some sort of an ominous warning from the ancestors. The fact that many women die as a result of circumcision is a point articulated by many of the works that detail the subject of female circumcision. Thiam writes of the deaths of women from these operations as follows:

> The deaths that result from these excision and infibulation account for approximately five to six percent of the annual mortality rate for women. The particularly high death rate here among parturient women is partly due to the low standards of hygiene found in many villages, but also to the persistence of clitoridectomy and infibulation. The principal cause of death is a severe haemorrhage, causing the women to bleed to death, when the scar tissue that had formed after the operations bursts open. (78)

All studies on this subject reviewed in this work note a significant loss of life for women who are circumcised in the countries that still practice the ritual. Like the women Thiam describes, Walker's Dura also "bleeds to death:"

> I remember my sister Dura's... my sister Dura's... I could get no further ... I had been going to say, before the boulder barred my throat: my sister's death; because that was how I always thought of Dura's demise. She'd simply died. She'd bled and bled and bled and then there was death. (80, 81)

Walker, here, is presenting a medical reality associated with what she refers to as "female genital mutilation"--that many women and girls die of complications associated with the

surgery. But the difference in interpretation of these events between Walker and others is distinct. For example, in Ngugi's work, The River Between, the novel emphasizes the fact that only Muthoni, daughter of the Christian missionary Joshua, dies after her circumcision. In Nwapa's novel, Efuru, there is no discussion of the physical repercussion of the operations (although I hypothesize that Efuru's inability to conceive could have been a direct result of her operation). But in Walker's novel, the emphasis is maintained throughout that Dura (and others) died, and later Tashi will call her death murder, implicating the society in general, but the tsunga, M'Lissa, in particular, because of her circumcision. Walker, then, takes her analysis beyond the scope of discussion presented by the earlier noted novelists. She does not merely present the ritual as a traditional "given," but she questions this ritual because of the devastating effects the operations have on women. Jenny asserts that:

> Intertextuality is thus a mechanism of perturbation. Its function is to prevent meaning from becoming lethargic--to avert the triumph of the cliche` by a process of transformation. Cultural persistence indeed provides nourishment for all texts, but it also poses a constant threat of stagnation, if the text yields to automation of association, does not resist the paralysing pressure of increasingly cumbersome stereotypes. (59)

Walker does not allow the cultural representation of female circumcision as a "taboo" subject to deter her from her analysis. She is not bound by the previous texts

unwillingness to discuss the harsh realities of the ritual. As earlier noted, Muthoni and Efuru are transformed into Tashi; their cries, their pain, finally voiced, and unmistakably deafening.

As Walker brings together the cruel actuality of Tashi's life, Tashi becomes an illustration of the circumcised women who survive the "cruel and barbaric" operation, whereas Dura becomes the representation of all the girls who have died because of female circumcision. There is no middle ground; survival means madness, meanness, and inhumanity, from which death is the only escape. Tashi's world is truly chaotic and disorderly. Walker does not really give much analysis to the significance of an African loss of identity which many, like Kenyatta argue, could possibly be one of the results of the eradication of female circumcision because of the actuality of the cruel physical and psychological consequences of the operations for women. This view of female circumcision is one that will continue to be voiced through the conversations of not only the females, but also the males in the work. The pain and suffering of women must, in Walker's analysis, take precedence over tradition.

The male views of circumcision are presented in a similar manner to the female views of the issue in the novel. Although the men approach the ritual from a different, more detached perspective, the argument against the ritual remains intact. This may have much to do with the fact that all the major male

figures in the book are from Western societies (i.e., the United States, France, and Switzerland) which no longer, (at least not openly) practice the ritual.

The most crucial male figure in Tashi's life is her American-born husband, Adam. There is little or no discussion about her relationship with her father, but there is much dialogue about her association with Adam. It is through Adam's voice that the reader is brought into an intimate part of Tashi's most private world. Tashi is seen and described through the eyes of Adam in several instances in the novel. For example, when Adam returns to Africa to find Tashi, it is after her circumcision, and she is a dramatically different person:

> The first thing I noticed was the flatness of her gaze. It frightened me...Tashi was in a rough bower made of branches. Lying on a mat made from the grass that grew around the camp. As she lay there, her head and shoulders propped against a boulder that resembled a small animal, she was busy making more of these grass mats. I could not tell if she was happy to see me. Her eyes no longer sparkled with anticipation. They were as flat as eyes that have been painted in, and with dull paint. There were five small cuts on each side f her face, like the marks one makes when playing tic-tac-toe. Her legs, ashen and wasted, were bound. (40; 43-44)

This vision of Tashi after her circumcision is "frightening" for her future husband. She has lost the vitality that made her so exciting to him before he left Africa.

Tashi is also seen through the vantage point of her husband's illegitimate son, Pierre. Pierre becomes, in a

sense, as obsessive about gaining an understanding of Tashi's experiences and the repercussions of these experiences as Tashi is about the rooster that haunts her inner soul. Although Tashi does not welcome this attention from Pierre, and she is even blatantly rude and violent towards him at one time, Pierre is not deterred from his desire to help Tashi. Adam remarks of his son's fixation on Tashi as follows:

> Since the moment, as a small boy, Pierre heard of Tashi's dark tower and her terror of it, he has never put her suffering out of his mind. Everything he learns, no matter how trivial or in what context or with whom, he brings to bear on her dilemma. The conversations we have as adults predictably include some bit of information that he has stored away to become a part of Tashi's puzzle. (175)

Pierre attempts to bring Tashi to an understanding of herself and her circumstances from a clinical, scholarly perspective. This approach would include the use of textbooks which explained to Tashi the "origin" of female circumcision in man's desire to eliminate that "duality" in both the sexes. But Tashi's dark tower needs much more than just a textbook explanation to illustrate her pain and suffering. Her real terror begins not after her circumcision, as Adam and Pierre seem to think, but after the circumcision and death of her sister Dura. This death will bring about the beginning of Tashi's loss of self. But it is Olivia, not Adam, who will remember the events that met them on their arrival into the Olinkan camp.

It is important to note here, once again, that Adam and Olivia's initial memory of Tashi is quite different. Adam remembers a happy, care-free, imaginative child, and while Olivia does remember the creative child, she also recalls the tear-streaked face and the sadness that met her on her arrival to the Olinkan camp. Olivia talks about her first meeting with Tashi intimately: they are similar in visage and age. But the tears are the most profound recollection; the sadness of the child stands out in Olivia's mind. Early on, it is as though Olivia can feel Tashi's pain. Schweickart asserts that

> The significant body of literature written by women presents feminist critics with another, more heartwarming, task: that of recovering, articulating, and elaborating positive expressions of women's point of view, of celebrating the survival of this point of view in spite of formidable forces that have been ranged against it. This shift to women's writing brings with it a shift in emphasis from the negative hermeneutic of ideological unmasking to a positive hermeneutic whose aim is the recovery and cultivation of women's culture. As Showalter has noted, feminist criticism of women's writing proposes to articulate women's difference: What does it mean for a woman to express herself in writing? How does a woman write as a woman? What does it mean for a woman to read without condemning herself to the position of the other? What does it mean for a woman, reading as a woman, to read literature written by a woman writing as a woman? (35) (51)

The focus here then, is on the woman's point of view. By concentrating on this "reading" of Tashi by Olivia, and not just Adam's representation of Tashi, I can note here that the most apparent transformation in Tashi as a whole and unique person began not <u>after</u> her circumcision, but more appropriately, it follows the circumcision and death of her sister Dura. Woman's difference is important here; it is no

longer merely a "negative hermeneutic." Woman does not, in feminism, need to resist seeing and feeling the world from her own personal perspective, which is not through the eyes of men, but her viewpoint becomes one that is valid and has significant meaning. If the view of Tashi is just from Adam's point of reference, one of the most significant events of Tashi's life will be obscured.

It is critical to note that although Tashi does remember the horror and carries around the pain of her own circumcision, in her dreams it is the memory of Dura's demise and the devouring bird that seems to drive her to and beyond the brinks of insanity, and it is this recollection that is obscured in Adam's view of Tashi. Olivia remembers the pain on the face of the child, and although she does not initially know the cause of the suffering, her memory of that meeting will remain with her throughout her life. For Tashi, it is the thought of the bird that consumes her mind, soul, and body, and most importantly, it gorges a little piece of the soul and body of her sister. The importance of Dura's subsequent death cannot be over emphasized in Tashi's mind.

The impact of Dura's circumcision and resulting demise on Tashi is immense. Tashi has a brief vision of her sister before and after the operation, and a recurrent dream of an enormous rooster eating something odd. This dream will haunt Tashi until she begins her psychological sessions with the

"Old Man," Mzee, who is her first psychiatrist. Tashi remembers:

> As I painted I remembered, as if a lid lifted off my brain, the day I had crept, hidden in the elephant grass, to the isolated hut from which came howls of pain and terror. Underneath a tree, on the bare ground outside the hut, lay a dazed row of little girls... Dura, however, was not among them; and I knew instinctively that it was Dura being held down and tortured inside the hut. Dura who made those inhuman shrieks that rent the air and chilled my heart. Abruptly, inside, there was silence... I saw M'Lissa shuffle out, and at first I didn't realize she was carrying anything, for it was so insignificant and unclean that she carried it...between her toes. A chicken--a hen, not a cock--was scratching futilely in the dirt... M'Lissa lifted her foot and flung this small object in the direction of the hen... and in one quick movement of beak and neck, (the hen) gobbled it down. (73)

It is this memory that will drive Tashi to paint what Adam describes as the "monstrous" bird, on a large wall in the home of Mzee. She becomes obsessed with the bird, and the "unclean" object that it devours. She experiences a "spiritual emptiness" until she understands the origin of the bird and its' significance in her dreams. It is only after she is able to exorcise the bird from her mind and soul that she can put some of the pieces of her shattered life back together. This is part of the "four-step" journey that Kubitscheck points out (noting Carol Christ) is present in many works by black women:

> Focusing on women's work about women's characters, Carol Christ proposes a four-

> step patten that is less linear and more cyclical. First, the female quester experiences social and spiritual emptiness, from which the second event, the experience of connection with natural or mystical sources of energy, rescues her. That experience leads to an awakening, after which the heroine names herself anew as a part of her re-vision of the world. Her spiritual journey complete, she must then attempt the social quest to find a place for this new self. (9-10)

The novel begins with a spiritually and socially "empty" Tashi. Tashi's spirit then finds itself somewhere between the "second and third" events Christ outlines. When she is able to visualize the horror of the monstrous bird, and the birds' connection to Dura and the events surrounding her death, the "demon" bird is exorcised from her soul. After the bird is on the wall, and out of her mind and spirit, Tashi is physically and psychologically "exhausted." But she has finally released the demon that has plagued and haunted her since Dura's operation. She has come face to face with the overbearing evil in her memory. Now she can say to herself and the world what she really feels about the death of her sister. Tashi believes, deep down inside, that Dura did not merely die, but that she is 'murdered' by the tsunga:

> I remembered my sister Dura's murder, I said, exploding the boulder. I felt a pain stitch throughout my body that I knew stitched my tears to my soul. No longer would my weeping be separate from what I remember. I began to wail, there in Mzee's old arms...She has been screaming in my ears since it happened, I said, suddenly feeling weary beyond expression. (81, Walker's emphasis)

Tashi now faces the reality of her life, which is the "herstory" of the death of her sister and her eventual mental illness. Now she can make herself a "whole" person again, and she must attempt to discover a place for this new, reborn self.

Dura's life and history, as well as Tashi's is, to Walker, a representation of the reality of many other circumcised girls and/or women whose operations have been "botched," all those whose circumcisions have been too "severe;" the millions of women who should never have had to endure such traumatic and life-altering pain. Walker's representation of these women is not merely then, fictional, but it is grounded in a definitive and easily documented reality. But authenticity has become a difficult entity for Tashi to comprehend. Tashi's mind continues to elevate the hen she saw which "gobbled up" Dura's insides to mythically large proportions. It seems here that Walker's presentation of the circumcision ritual does takes on a mythic image, but it is an impression based on the reality of the suffering that many women who have endured because of this ritual.

It is this overall and wholly negative presentation of circumcision that permeates Walker's novel. And in this view Tashi seems so adamantly to represents Walker's own opinions about female circumcision. For example, Tashi's recollections of Dura's life and death became overwhelming burdens which continually weigh her down. Walker is writing Tashi's

experience, again, not only as a woman, but as a woman who refuses to acknowledge the depth of history and tradition because that convention has caused the deaths and mental destructions of so many women. She, then, deconstructs the importance of the rituals to the survival of the individuality of certain groups of people in face of the fear and horror experienced by women like Tashi. This is one of the presentations in the novel that makes Walker seem much more of a "feminist" than a "womanist." Here, the needs of the individual are the focus. It is Tashi, and how she feels and is affected by Dura's, and later her own circumcision, that is confronted by the author. This is contrary to what seems to be the one of the most important aspects of "African" life--communal and dependent living. In her essay on "Feminist Criticism and the African Novel," Katherine Frank notes that this problem must be faced by those who write by and about African women:

> --the problem of the African woman torn between her desire for independence and fulfillment and the claims and constraints of her society--is the most striking and controversial issue in contemporary African fiction by and about women. But it is also a manifestation of the fundamental opposition between western and African values that permeates African literature and the critical writing on it. (46-47)

This is the point that seems to be most obviously missing from Walker's analysis: the importance of the survival of the African community. It is only the independence of woman from

ritual that Walker is willing to discuss. For a brief moment, Walker seems to address the issue of communal obligation and survival, but she is quick to deconstruct her own understanding of the people and their traditions in the novel. One example of this deconstruction of tradition is Tashi's first encounter with the African American female psychologist Raye. This meeting is indicative of some of Walker's own queries about why women would submit themselves to what she describes as a "horrifying" ritual.

During one of their sessions, Raye questions Tashi in an abrupt and up front manner about why she would surrender herself to such a painful operation. Raye interrogates Tashi in an indepth manner and even seems to deconstruct Tashi's arguments for having been initiated. For example, when Tashi states that no Olinka man will consider marrying a woman who is not circumcised, Raye intimates that Tashi knew that she was going to marry her American love, Adam. Tashi's reply reveals much of her anguish and frustration:

> Everyone knew that if a woman was not circumcised her unclean parts would grow so long they'd soon touch her thighs; she'd become masculine and arouse herself... Certainly to all my friends who'd been circumcised, my uncircumcised vagina was though a monstrosity. They laughed at me. Jeered at me for having a tail... To be accepted as a real woman by the Olinka people; to stop the jeering. Otherwise I was a thing. (119; 120)

Tashi continues by stating that she feels outside of her tribe because of her relationship with Adam and the other

missionaries, and she feels that the only way she can get back in will be to acquiesce to the tsunga's knife. Unlike her earlier assertion that she has the operation because she wants to uphold tribal and familial tradition, she maintains here that she has the surgery basically because of myths surrounding the clitoris, as well as peer pressure from her age-mates. In her earlier statements, she presents herself as a proud Olinkan youth, determined to carry on the traditions of her ancestors. Here, she is a frightened young woman who does not want to become a "thing."

The reasons for the different presentations of arguments that Tashi offers may have more to do with Tashi's age at the time of her circumcision than an error in Walker's writing. Tashi does later, in the aforementioned passage, describe herself as an "ignorant and innocent" young girl. Thus, it could simply be that with hindsight, and years of experiencing the torture that resulted from her circumcision, Tashi has come to the realization that her reasons for having the operation are not at all as clearly defined as she once imagined. But it could also be that Walker is merely continuing her original argument about the horrors of circumcision by deconstructing Tashi's own initial understanding of the significance of the ritual. She transposes Tashi's original interpretation of the ritual to present this older, wiser version of the events that led Tashi to her decision.

Tashi and all the other women in this novel who undergo circumcision deeply regret, and are angry at the society because of their participation in the ceremonies. But this is not always the case. As earlier noted, Lightfoot-Klein points out that the women she interviewed not only maintain that they did not regret their circumcisions, but that they also had enjoyable sex lives and experienced "extreme" sexual pleasure in their relationships with their husbands:

> Circumcised women, in general, and uneducated village women, in particular, give every indication...of being enviably intact in terms of sexual 'lustiness,' in spite of their mutilation, quite contrary to the intent of circumcision to reduce their sexual drive...How is orgasm possible at all under such conditions? Contrary to expectations, nearly 90% of all women interviewed said that they experienced orgasm (climax) or had at various periods of their marriage experienced it. (382; 383-84)

There are no representations of these women in Walker's novel. Why? Maybe she does not really believe that these women exist. After all, how can one undergo a pharonic circumcision (which is the operation usually performed in the Sudan), being mutilated and sewn-up, and then "enjoy" penetration? As earlier noted, Bennett states that the clitoris functions only as an organ of pleasure, and if it is removed, how can a woman experience pleasure?

There are those, moreover, who argue adamantly against Walker and her presentation of the ritual. How can she, as one outside of a cultural context, speak for these women and

how they feel about themselves and their sex lives? There are, hence, some African people who are quite upset by Walker's presentation, and they themselves defend the custom and/or their communities right to maintain the practice. In a 1992 book review of Walker's work called, "The Cutting Edge," Erich Eichman articulates the response of the African panelists to Walker's novel:

> As the two Africans on the panel pointed out, where the practice is routine it is often desired--by the girls themselves or by mothers for their daughters. To go uncircumcised in some African cultures is to forgo an essential rite of passage, to suffer ridicule and neglect, and to make oneself (literally) less nubile. There are even women who claim it adds to sexual pleasure. We were admonished more than once by the African panelists to eschew the insensitivity and arrogance--the "Desert Storm approach," as it was called--by which the West supposedly intrudes upon Africa and its indigenous populations. (49)

So even at what was called a "debate about female circumcision," which turned out really to be Walker's book publicity and signing session for Possessing the Secret of Joy, the "African" panelists admonish Walker and others for their "insensitivity and arrogance" when it comes to this African tradition, as well as what they call the "Desert Storm" approach (i.e., the war between Iraq and the United States and Kuwait) to anything uniquely and culturally "African." Walker totally negates the issue of the cultural significance of circumcision to place the issue of women above the survival of a culture, a tradition, and even a society.

But this is also another problematic of Walker's presentation, because, at times, it seems to me that she seems to think that these women can not speak for, or even comprehend, their own suffering.

For example, in Warrior Marks, she writes:

> My beloved called to wish me a Happy Valentine's Day, and it feels odd to think of a Valentine's Day kind of love here, where men have three and four wives, all of them poor, and even the mosque is forbidden to women until after menopause, when they are closer to being male...What has happened to these people, that they seem so joyless and oppressed?...Everything, including massive overgrazing of livestock, turning the fertile land to desert, is merely "the will of Allah"? I think genital mutilation plays a role. The early submission by force that is the hallmark of mutilation. The feeling of being overpowered and thoroughly dominated by those you are duty bound to respect. The result is women with downcast eyes and stiff backs and necks (they are of course beaten by their fathers and brothers and husbands). (69)

Walker continues by stating that there are some "Africans" she finds "tender and sincere," and that she "loves" spontaneously. In the aforementioned passage though, Walker attacks not only circumcision, but also polygamy, blatantly stating that it is not possible for the women of this area (Senegal) to experience a "Valentine's Day" love because they live in these many-wived relationships. I do not know if I agree with Walker here in saying that these women cannot experience a "Valentine's Day love" which is supposedly indicative of the love experience in societies in the United

States (which has such an alarmingly high divorce rate). However, it is apparent that this ritual has had such a profound effect on these various women that they not only allow themselves, their daughters, and their daughters' daughters to participate in the ritual, but many times they insist that it be done to those with the "modern" interpretations of women's lives, based on their contact with "Western" cultures or other "outside" ideologies.

Walker continues her attack on the ritual by presenting the women who circumcise as monstrous representations of many of the ills of African society and the patriarchy. In one presentation, this is how she describes one of the "tsunga's" she meets on her journey to Africa:

> She (the circumcisor) pontificated at length about "the tradition" and how she was chosen by the village to perform circumcisions--gold, she said, was "poured" over her. Two bulls were killed. (This should have told her something, I thought, since the bull is a very ancient symbol of woman, the shape of its head and horns the shape of her internal reproductive organs and a symbol for them.) All the women before her had been circumcised. All those after her would be, also. She said this flatly, defiantly, looking directly at me...Later, interviewing the circumcisor, I asked her what she felt when the children cried and screamed. She didn't hear them, she said. Interviewing her was very difficult. I glanced at her hands--extremely dirty, with black gunk under her nails--and thought of their coarse hardness against the tenderest parts of these girls. (46, 47, Warrior Marks)

This is much like the presentation of M'Lissa that Walker offers in the novel. To Walker, the tsunga is a woman who does not feel, does not hear the cries of the children; she is a mutilator and a murderer. M'Lissa is the epitome of these unfeeling destroying, mutilating women.

It is the voice and the face of M'Lissa, the destroyer of souls, that Tashi must travel, literally and psychologically, back to Africa to confront and hear before she can find any peace. She wants to understand the history of the custom that cost her sister Dura to lose her life, and herself to lose her soul. But to Walker, there is no need to understand the tradition. It is merely another custom in a litany of male-oriented practices used to subjugate and humiliate women. Tashi clearly relates this view of M'Lissa as a terrible mutilator and destroyer of souls, before and after her return to Africa, which seems most apparently Walker's own view, to the reader.

And thus, it is this presentation of circumcision and the circumcisors as mutilator/mutilated that dominates the vast majority of discussions of the ritual in the novel. Even after years of psychotherapy and an attempt to alter her view of the world and herself, Tashi must return to Africa in search of her lost self. Walker seems to take Tashi in search of the same demon she searches for on her journey to Africa which she describes in Warrior Marks, and Tashi, too, is able to find that demon one week after her arrival in the old

Olinkan land. Tashi is surprised, however, to find that not only is M'Lissa alive and well, but that she is now considered a "national monument" to the Olinkan people:

> She had been honored by the Olinkan government for her role during the wars of liberation, when she'd acted as a nurse as devoted to her charges as Florence Nightingale, and for her unfailing adherence to the ancient customs and traditions of the Olinka state. No mention was made of how she fulfilled this obligation. (147)

Tashi will visit M'Lissa several times in an attempt to understand her as a tsunga, and in order to try to comprehend the significance of her loss of herself and her inner peace. In one of her many conversations with M'Lissa, the old woman recounts to Tashi the terrifying story of her own pharonic circumcision. She tells Tashi that because the job of tsunga is usually confined to one family, it was her own mother's duty to circumcise her. Here, M'Lissa reveals the horrifying events of her own operation:

> Then, one day, my mother had to circumcise the girls in my age group. Prior to that day, for weeks, she prayed to the little idol constantly. And when my turn came she tried to get away with cutting lightly. Of course she took the outer lips, because four strong eagle-eyed women held me down; and of course the inner lips too. But she tried to leave me a nub...But the other women saw...What my mother started, the witchdoctor finished...He showed no mercy. In fright and unbearable pain my body bucked under the razor-sharp stone he was cutting me with... I could never again see myself, for the child that finally rose from the mat three months

> later...was not the child who had been taken there. (214-15)

M'Lissa's horrific description of her own circumcision seems to account for her callous behavior toward not only Tashi, but all other girls and women. She later tells Tashi that after her circumcision she could not "feel" anything anymore. She hints that this lack of feeling is the event that has allowed her to continue to perform the same terrifying surgery on other females. Walker notes in an earlier quoted section of Warrior Marks that the women who circumcise other women tell her that they do not hear the cries of the children. Perhaps this is because they, like M'Lissa, have also experienced a painful and disfiguring operation. But one is not really allowed to feel sympathy for M'Lissa except for a fleeting moment. This view of the tsunga as an ugly, mutilating creature can also be found in Warrior Marks. And it is this destructive creature who is the "cause" of Tashi's pain and suffering. The repercussions of this horrible surgery for Tashi are seen quite vividly through the recollections of Tashi's husband Adam.

Although Adam does not seem to remember Tashi as she really is upon their arrival in the Olinkan camp, he is keenly aware of some of the most severe consequences and complications associated with Tashi's operation, some which surprisingly echo the anguish M'Lissa experienced after her own circumcision:

> The operation she'd had done to herself joined her, she felt, to these women, whom she envisioned as strong, invincible... It was only when she at least was told by M'Lissa, who one day unbound her legs that she might sit up and walk a few steps that she noticed her own proud walk had become a shuffle. It now took a quarter of an hour for her to pee. Her menstrual periods lasted ten days. She was incapacitated with cramps for nearly half the month. There were premenstrual cramps... There was the odor, too, of soured blood, which no amount of scrubbing, until we got to America ever washed off. (63-64)

For Adam, Tashi's surgery is an ever-present phenomenon. And of course, M'Lissa is the creator of this "albatross" for Tashi because she performs the operation. The above passage is just a brief example of the medical history of Tashi after her surgery. This is also a relatively accurate account of what could have and did happen to many women who were pharonically circumcised. Studies by Lillian Passmore-Sanderson, Asma El Dareer, and Olayinka Koso-Thomas note that these physical problems occur often in women who have been "tightly sewn" after a pharonic circumcision. Walker presents, then, a gruesomely realistic portrayal of some of the physical consequences associated with female circumcision, and her use of language to articulate the terror that Tashi feels is simply phenomenal.

Walker's conscious use of language as a vehicle to bring the reader into the terrifying world of Tashi is unmistakable. Hayden White comments on the use of language by the novelist

(as opposed to the use of language by the historian) as follows:

> historians usually work with much less linguistic (and therefore less poetic) self consciousness than writers of fiction do. They tend to treat language as a transparent vehicle of representation that brings no cognitive baggage of its own into the discourse. Great works of fiction will usually... not only be about their putative subject matter, but also about language itself and the problematical relation between language, consciousness, and reality--including the writer's own language. (127, White's emphasis, Tropics of Discourse)

Walker, then, as poet, novelist, and fiction writer uses word such as 'painful,' 'mutilation,' traumatize,' unhealable,' and 'frightened,' to describe Tashi's (and other women's) encounters with circumcision. The expressions of the author fill the mind of the reader with an unwaveringly negative view of the ritual world. In the sentiments that cover the pages of the novel, circumcision is a ritual without any purpose or significance, religious or otherwise. M'Lissa even seems to sneer at and taunt Tashi for her "supposed" need to be circumcised in order to feel connected to her people:

> But what did you think, I ask M'Lissa. When I came to the Mbele camp asking to be "bathed."
> I thought you were a fool, she says without hesitation. The very biggest. (237)

This is probably one of the most disturbing portrayals in Walker's work. The tsunga goes to the extent of calling Tashi a "fool" for allowing herself to be needlessly tortured.

M'Lissa, in this one instance, seems to articulate Walker's own views of the ritual. Why is it, she argues, that the men who so adamantly support the ritual keep their bodies intact? Tashi recounts some of the 'instructions' she received as a young woman as to the maintenance of tribal traditions:

> Even from prison we received our instructions, I said. Good instructions. sensible; correct. From Our Leader. That we must remember who we were. That we must fight the white oppressors without ceasing; without, even, the contemplation of ceasing;... That we must reclaim the descendants of those of our people sold into slavery throughout the world... that we must return to the purity of our own culture and traditions. That we must not neglect our ancient customs. (115)

But as the novel continues, Walker deconstructs these arguments because, as M'Lissa notes, the only way that these customs can be maintained is through the maiming of women. And the only way that men will be able to understand this horror will be to submit themselves to castration. Walker brings into the discourse the analysis of men like the earlier noted Jomo Kenyatta, who fought for the preservation of female circumcision, yet did not have to suffer a similar fate in their own operations. M'Lissa asks Tashi:

> Did our leader keep his penis? Is there evidence that even one testicle was removed? The man had eleven children by three different wives. I think this means the fellow's private parts were intact. (238)

M'Lissa makes Tashi confront her own view of self and her society. It seems that here M'Lissa has some brief 'positive'

function in Tashi's life. She is brutally honest at times about the uselessness of the circumcision ritual. She tells Tashi the 'truth' about her valued leaders, and she articulates the reality that the fight for freedom included women only when it was good for the cause. But she does not leave it merely at informing Tashi about the cold realities of the ritual. She takes her discussion one step further, too far for Tashi, when she articulates her assertion that Tashi's own mother was the cause of her sister Dura's death:

> The death of your sister--what was her name?--was your stupid mother Nafa's fault. I was not absolutely sure the chief would make us return to circumcision... Stop feeling sorry for yourself, she says. You are like your mother. If Dura is not bathed, she said, no one will marry her. She never seemed to notice no one had ever married me, and that I lived anyway... Being bathed did not kill me, she said... (252-53)

Tashi's mind seems to deteriorate more after this meeting with M'Lissa. M'Lissa reveals through this conversation that not only did Tashi's mother insist that her daughter be circumcised, but also that she did it with the knowledge that Dura 'bled easily' and profusely, (which could probably indicate that Dura was a hemophiliac). What Walker nor M'Lissa discuss, however, is the reason why all the other little girls are also circumcised at the same time that Dura is circumcised. This may just be an inconsistency in the novel. The way Dura's circumcision is presented in this conversation with M'Lissa, it would seem that Nafa is the only one who

insists that her child be circumcised. But from Tashi's own recollection, there is a whole line of "puffy-faced" little girls outside M'Lissa's hut before Dura is brought out. But the emphasis here is on Dura's mother, and her supposed resolution to have the ritual performed on her daughter. Did Nafa know that the circumcision could possibly cause Dura's death? Or is M'Lissa simply trying to shift the blame to Tashi's mother, rather than accepting her own role in the death of Dura? And what about all the other little girls? Did their mothers also insist that they be circumcised? Or is this just a question that Walker does not address in her discussion?

I do not think that these questions are ever fully addressed in the novel, but one thing that is certain is that Tashi views the old woman as a mutilator of minds, bodies, and spirits, and even as a murderer. Unfeeling, unkind, uncaring--M'Lissa seems to embody all of these negative qualities. Where is her humanity? It is also apparent in Walker's presentation of the circumcisors in Warrior Marks, that she does not feel any empathy, or have any understanding for these tsunga women and their traditions. The women who perform these surgeries are described in monster-like images, and M'Lissa seems to be the essence of that particular kind of demon.

There is but one brief moment when the reader seems to be allowed a instant of sympathy for the deviant M'Lissa has

become, and that is when she recounts the terrifying events surrounding her own circumcision. It is but fleeting, though. M'Lissa returns, after the memory of her own terror, to taunt and torment Tashi. Tashi comes to the realization at this point that in order to truly end her own suffering, she must end the life of the old woman who she feels is responsible for so much of that pain--M'Lissa. In a letter to Lisette, her husband Adam's now deceased lover, Tashi writes:

> I killed her alright. I placed a pillow over her face and lay across it for an hour. Her sad stories about her life caused me to lose my taste for slashing her. She had told me it was traditional for a well-appreciated tsunga to be murdered by someone she circumcised, then burned. I carried out what was expected of me. It is curious, is it not, that the traditional tribal society dealt so cleverly with its appreciation for the tsunga and its hatred of her. But of course the tsunga was to the traditional elders merely a witch they could control, an extension of their own dominating power. (274-75)

There is the slight notion at the end of the quotation that M'Lissa is, perhaps, not so bad because she is merely a pawn in a game played by the patriarchy. There is also the intimation that she planned her own demise by telling Tashi that it is tradition for one of the females she has circumcised to kill her. But yet, to Tashi, M'Lissa plays the game too well, allowing her mind, body and soul's alteration to remove her from the most intimate sisterhood within the world of women. She seems here again to voice Walker's own feelings about women who circumcise other women. But unlike

M'Lissa, who Walker represents as one who loses touch with any "female" sisterhood in a woman-centered universe because of her continued "mutilation" of other women, Tashi is "saved" as she is able to find one of her final "sisterhoods" in pouring out her heart to the woman who was once a rival for her husband's love and affection, Lisette.

At the end of the letter to Lisette, Tashi has found her lost soul. She signs the letter, "Tashi Evelyn Johnson--Reborn, soon to be Deceased" (277). Tashi is not whole again until she finds one fact for herself: that RESISTANCE is the "secret to joy." Because she has finally resisted, in her "murder" of M'Lissa, whether real or imagined, she has finally made someone accountable for her pain. Walker seems to write the perfect ending to the story by allowing M'Lissa to be killed, but Tashi also must lose her life to regain her soul.

Walker undoubtedly indicts female circumcision, the tsungas, and sometimes even the women themselves who participate in the ritual. She is addressing what will most likely become one of the most important and explosive issues of the feminist/womanist movement since the fight for the right to vote--rights of individual women over their own bodies.

Walker does, then, present a very poignant and beautifully painful portrait of the life and suffering of a woman who experiences an unspeakable pain. Walker deconstructs the importance of the continuation of the practice of female

circumcision in any cultural context. Unlike her predecessors, Ngugi and Nwapa, her emphasis is as one grounded in a response to the suffering of woman. She has, it seems to me, removed herself from the "womanist" ideology of the world that she herself defines, and posits herself firmly as a feminist. This presentation also removes the main character, Tashi, from her most "natural," 'African' universe into a world which focuses on the needs of the individual. Only in this world can Tashi survive. The characters, Walker's Tashi, Nwapa's Efuru, and Ngugi's Muthoni are connected, but they are also separated by a distinct ideology and presentation of events. Walker's presentation is not without problems. But it is, in some instances, a much richer and deeper presentation of the pain and suffering of women who have endured this ritual for generations than the presentations of Ngugi or Nwapa.

CONCLUSION

Female circumcision--female genital mutilation--female initiation--infibulation--clitoridectomy. When I first heard about female circumcision, I was in my second term as a graduate student at Michigan State University. I did not know then what impact this issue would have on my academic life and work. But after having the opportunity to read the works that I have discussed in this study, I found myself horrified, intrigued, and intensely interested in learning more about what I felt could only be described as a cruel and barbaric custom. However, as I began to read through the books, and analyze the arguments for and against the maintenance of the ritual, as well as reading and re-reading the literary works on the subject, I developed feelings about the ritual that could be called, at best, ambiguous.

I could never in my life, as a woman or mother, believe that it is right for a woman, a teenage girl, or especially a little baby to be subjected to the pain and trauma associated with female circumcision. But as I read those works, I began to feel a kinship with those like Muthoni who died defiantly attempting to maintain the rituals of her people. How can her experience be discounted? How can her cries and her feelings be ignored? In a community like the African American community, we, too, feel that there is a need to hold on to traditions. Many of us feel the need to identify with "Mother

Africa," while others insist that we remain "true" to ourselves and not become so much a part of "the white man's world" that we no longer understand who we are or what our experiences represent. Yet, when we read about issues like female circumcision, there is only one response: it is a cruel and primitive practice used to subjugate and humiliate women. This is most definitely true! But what about all the Muthoni's of the world who just want to preserve their culture, their belief in the ancestors, and their connections with the past? Should their loyalty, their feelings of cultural dignity suffer the legacy of so man other uniquely "African" traditions--total negation and annihilation?

I do not have any simple answers to these queries. I only know that it is not simply a question of "women's rights." We are presently faced, in this country, with a similar, yet vastly different argument over women's rights as the heated debate rages on about abortion. What right does a woman have to take the life of an unborn child, but what right does society have to say to that woman that she must have that child, whether or not she can feed it, clothe it, or whether or not she wants the responsibility that comes with having a child? These are profoundly difficult issues associated with cultural identities, political constituencies, and religious convictions. And, I assert that the issue of female circumcision is as complex an issue with no monolithic "rights" or "wrongs." Can one tell another person that they

no longer have the right to participate in rituals that have culturally represented who and what they are for generations? But can one insist that a little girl be subjected to the suffering and atrocity associated with female circumcision? The matters are so multifarious, so multi-dimensional, and so overbearingly weighty that it is easy to understand the conflict that occurred in Gikuyu land, and which still occurs today all over the world as a result of this ceremony.

It seems to me that first of all, other issues involving the disenfranchisement of women in the cultures that maintain the ritual must be addressed. If women continue to be taught that this tradition is the all-defining, all encompassing meaning of who they are, in or outside their communities, this ritual will always remain intact, though it may not be easy to identify. But even if women are educated, education alone can not totally eradicate female circumcision. There must be a cooperative effort between the men and the women to redefine the roles and the positions of women in these various societies. But if one looks realistically at the possibility of this happening in a war torn Somalia, or amidst the mass starvation in the Sudan, the hopes are somewhat diminished. The issues facing the people in many of these countries are so complex, and physical survival seems to take precedence over matters of humanity and equality. This is sad, but it is also true. And the answers to the questions surrounding this and other issues facing many of the people are, I am certain, just

as complex. It is not the attempt of this author to confuse or disturb the reader at this point. However, living in a society that is apt to confront many of the most difficult and devastating social and political problems of our time, I would like for you to carefully consider all the facets of this complicated ritual. Come to terms with your own feelings, and let us converse.

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